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Loyal Heart; OR, The Trappers of Arkansas.

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CHAPTER I.

WHO COMES THERE?

To the westward of the United States extends, many hundred miles beyond the Mississippi, an immense territory, unknown up to this day, composed of uncultivated lands, on which appears neither the house of the white man nor the *hatto* of the Indian.

This vast desert intersected by dark forests, with mysterious paths traced by the steps of wild beasts, and by verdant prairies with high and tufted herbage undulating with the least wind, is watered by powerful streams, of which the principal are the great Canadian river, the Arkansas and the Red river.

Over these lands, endowed with so rich a vegetation, wander innumerable troops of wild horses, buffaloes, elks, long-horns, and those thousands of animals which the civilization of other parts of America is every day driving back, and which regain their primitive liberty in these regions. On this account, powerful Indian tribes have established their hunting-grounds in this country.

Toward the end of the year 1837, in the latter days of the month of September, by the Indians called the month of the falling leaves, a man, still young, and who from his complexion, notwithstanding his costume entirely like that of the Indians, it was easy to perceive was a white man, was seated an hour before sunset near a fire, the want of which began to be felt at this season, in one of the least known spots of the prairie.

This man was at most thirty-five to thirty-six years old. The features of his face were handsome and noble, impressed with that pride and energy which savage life bestows. He was tall, slender, and perfectly well proportioned; his nervous limbs, upon which rose muscles of extreme rigidity, proved that he was endowed with more than common strength. His costume was composed of a kind of close drawers falling down to his ankles, and fastened to his hips by a leather belt, and of a calico hunting-blouse,

embroidered with ornaments in wool of different colors, which descended to his mid-leg. This blouse, open in front, left exposed his embrowned chest. "Bottines" of untanned deerskin protected him from the bites of reptiles and covered his knees. A cap made of the skin of a beaver, whose tail hung down behind, covered his head, allowing to escape long and luxuriant curls of black hair, beginning to be threaded with white, to spread over his broad shoulders.

A magnificent rifle-barreled carbine was placed within reach of his hand, a game-bag was hung to his shoulder-belt, and two buffalo horns suspended at his girdle were filled with powder and balls. Two long double pistols were negligently lying near his carbine.

The hunter, armed with a long knife, which the inhabitants of the prairies never lay aside, was occupied in conscientiously skinning a beaver, while carefully watching the haunch of a deer which was roasting at the fire, suspended by a string, and lending an ear to the slightest noise that arose in the prairies.

The spot where this man was seated was ad-

mirably suited for a halt of a few hours. It was a clearing at the summit of a moderately elevated hill, which by its position, commanding the prairie to a great distance, prevented a surprise. A spring sparkled at a few paces from the place where the hunter had established his bivouac, and descended, forming a capricious cascade, to the plain. The high and abundant grass afforded an excellent pasture to two superb horses, with wild and sparkling eyes, which, safely tethered, were grinding their provender at a short distance from him. The fire, lighted with dry wood, and sheltered on three sides by the rock, only allowed a thin column of smoke to escape, scarcely perceptible at ten paces' distance, and a curtain of tall trees concealed the encampment from the indiscreet looks of those who were probably in ambush in the neighborhood.

The red fires of the setting sun tinged with beautiful reflections the tops of the great trees, and the sun itself was near disappearing behind the mountains which bounded the horizon, when the horses, suddenly staying their repast, raised their heads and pointed their ears—signs of

alarm which did not escape the hunter.

Although he heard no suspicious sound, and all appeared calm around him, he hastened to place the skin of the beaver before the fire, stretched upon two crossed sticks, and without rising he put his hand toward his carbine.

The cry of the hawk was heard and repeated, three different times at equal intervals.

The hunter replaced his carbine by his side with a smile, and resumed his watchful attention to the supper. Almost immediately the grass was violently opened, and two magnificent bloodhounds came bounding to lay themselves down by the hunter, who patted them for an instant, and not without difficulty quieted their caresses.

The dogs only preceded by a few minutes a second hunter, who made his appearance almost immediately in the clearing.

This new personage, much younger than the first—for he did not appear to be more than twenty-two years old—was a tall, thin, agile man, of a nervous form, a round head, lighted by two gray eyes, sparkling with intelligence, and endowed with a physiognomy open and loyal, to which long, light hair gave an appearance somewhat childish.

He was clothed in the same costume as his companion, and on arriving, threw down by the fire a string of birds which he had carried at his shoulder.

They then set about pre-



"One!" cried the pirate, with a ferocious laugh. "Two!" screamed Eagle's Head, and with the bound of a panther he leaped upon the pirate's horse behind him.

paring one of those suppers which long exercise has always the privilege of finding excellent.

The night had completely set in; the desert awakened by degrees; the howling of the wild beasts already resounded in the prairie.

The hunters, after having supped with a good appetite, lit their pipes, and placing their backs to the fire, in order that the flames should not prevent them from perceiving the approach of any suspicious visitor which darkness might bring them, they smoked with the enjoyment of people who, after a long and painful journey, taste an instant of repose which they shall not meet with again for some time.

"Well?" said the hunter, laconically, between two puffs of tobacco.

"You were right," replied the other.

"Ah!"

"Yes, we have oblied too much to the right; it was that which made us lose the scent."

"I was sure of it," replied the first; "you see, Belhumeur, you trust too much to your Canadian habits; the Indians with whom we have to do here in no way resemble the Iroquois, who run over the hunting-grounds of your country."

Belhumeur nodded his head in sign of acquiescence.

"As for the rest," replied the other, "this is of very little importance at this moment; what is urgent is to know who are our thieves."

"I know."

"Good!" replied the other, withdrawing his pipe quickly from his mouth; "and who are the Indians who have dared to steal traps marked with my cipher?"

"The Comanches."

"I suspected as much. Ten of our best traps stolen during the night! They shall pay for them dearly! And where are the Comanches at this moment?"

"Within three leagues of us at most. It is a party of plunderers composed of a dozen men; according to their direction they are remaining their mountains."

"They shall not arrive there," said the hunter, casting a glance at his carbine.

"They will only have what they deserve," said Belhumeur, with a loud laugh. "I leave it to you, Loyal Heart, to punish them for their insult; but you will be still more determined to avenge yourself upon them when you know by whom they are commanded."

"Ah, ah! I know their chief, then?"

"A little of him," said Belhumeur, smiling, "it is Nehunutah."

"The Eagle's Head!" cried Loyal Heart, almost bounding from his seat. "Oh, ho! yes, I know him, and God grant that this time I may settle the old account there is between us. His moccasins have long enough trod the same path with me and barred my passage."

Having pronounced these words, the hunter, sorry at having allowed the anger which mastered him to appear, resumed his pipe, and continued to smoke with a feigned carelessness that did not at all impose upon his companion.

At length Belhumeur turned towards his companion.

"Shall I watch?" asked he.

"No," replied Loyal Heart, in a low voice; "sleep; I will be sentinel for you and myself too."

Belhumeur laid himself down by the fire, and in a few minutes slept profoundly.

When the owl hooted his matinal song, which appeared to salute the near appearance of the sun, Loyal Heart, who during the night had remained motionless as a statue of marble, awakened his companion, when the hunters saddled their horses, descended the hill with precaution, and galloped off upon the track of the Comanches. At that moment the sun appeared radiant in the heavens, dissipating the darkness, and illuminating the prairie with its magnificent and vivifying light.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNTERS.

Two words now upon the personages we have just brought upon the scene, and who are destined to play an important part in this history.

Loyal Heart—this name was the only one by which the hunter was known throughout the prairies of the West—enjoyed an immense reputation for skill, loyalty, and courage among the Indian tribes, with whom the chances of his adventurous existence had placed him in relation. All respected him. The white hunters and trappers, whether Spaniards, North-Americans, or half-breeds, had a high opinion of his experience of the woods, and often had recourse to his counsels.

The pirates of the prairies themselves, men of the sack and cord, the refuse of civilization, who only lived by rapine and exactions,

did not dare to attack him, and avoided as much as possible throwing themselves in his way.

Thus this man had succeeded, by the force alone of his intelligence and his will, in creating for himself, and almost unknown to himself, a power accepted and recognized by the ferocious inhabitants of these vast deserts, a power which he only employed in the common interest, and to facilitate for all the means of giving themselves up in safety to the occupations they had adopted.

No one knew who Loyal Heart was, or whence he came; the greatest mystery covered his early years.

One day, about twenty years before, when he was very young, some hunters had fallen in with him on the banks of the Arkansas in the act of laying traps. The few questions put to him concerning his preceding life remained unanswered; and the hunters, people not very talkative by nature, fancying they perceived from the embarrassment and reticence of the young man, that he had a secret which he desired to keep, made a scruple of pressing him further—and all was said.

At the same time, contrary to other hunters, or trappers of the prairies, who have all one or two companions with whom they associate, and whom they never leave, Loyal Heart lived alone, having no fixed habitation; he traversed the country in all directions, without pitching his tent any where.

Reserved and melancholy, he avoided the society of his equals, although always ready, when occasion presented itself, to render them services, or even to expose his life for them. Then, when they attempted to express their gratitude, he would clap spurs to his horse, and go and set his traps at a distance, to give time to those he had obliged, to forget the service he had rendered, if it were not impossible.

Every year, at the same period, about the month of October, Loyal Heart disappeared for several entire weeks, without any one being able to suspect where he was gone; and when he returned, it was observed that for several days his countenance was more dark and sad than ever.

One day he came back from one of these mysterious expeditions, accompanied by two magnificent young bloodhounds, which had from that time remained with him, and of which he seemed very fond.

Five years before the period at which we open our narrative, returning one evening from laying his traps for the night, he all at once perceived the fire of an Indian camp through the trees.

A white youth, of scarcely seventeen years of age, was fastened to a stake, and served as a mark for the knives of the red-skins, who amused themselves in martyring him before they sacrificed him to their sanguinary rage.

Loyal Heart, listening to nothing but the pity which the victim inspired, and without reflecting on the danger to which he exposed himself, rushed in among the Indians, and placed himself in front the prisoner. These Indians were Comanches. Astonished by this sudden irruption, which they were far from expecting, they remained a few instants motionless, confounded by so much audacity.

Without losing a moment, Loyal Heart cut the bonds of the prisoner, and giving him a knife, which the other received with joy, they both prepared to sell their lives dearly.

White men inspire Indians with an instinctive, invincible terror; the Comanches, however, on recovering from their surprise, showed signs of rushing forward to attack the two men who seemed to defy them.

But the light of the fire, which fell full upon the face of the hunter, had permitted some of them to recognize him. The red-skins drew back with respect, murmuring among themselves,

"Loyal Heart! the great pale-face hunter!"

Eagle's Head, for so was the chief of these Indians named, did not know the hunter; it was the first time he had descended into the plains of the Arkansas, and he could not comprehend the exclamation of his warriors; besides, he cordially detested the pale-faces, against whom he had sworn to carry on a war of extermination. Enraged at what he considered cowardice on the part of those he commanded, he advanced alone against Loyal Heart, but an extraordinary occurrence took place.

The Comanches threw themselves upon their chief, and notwithstanding the respect in which they held him, they disarmed him, to prevent his making any attack upon the hunter. Loyal Heart, after thanking them, himself restored his arms to the chief, who received them coldly, casting a sinister glance at his generous adversary.

Loyal Heart had, in less than ten minutes, made for himself an implacable enemy and a devoted friend.

The history of the prisoner was simple.

Having left Canada with his father, for the purpose of hunting in the prairies, they had fallen into the hands of the Comanches; after a desperate resistance, his father had fallen, covered with wounds. The Indians, irritated at this death, which robbed them of a victim, had bestowed the greatest care upon the young man, in order that he might honorably figure at the stake of punishment, and which

would inevitably have happened had it not been for the providential intervention of Loyal Heart.

After having obtained these particulars, the hunter asked the young man what his intentions were, and whether the rough apprenticeship he had gone through as a wanderer of the woods had not disgusted him with a life of adventures.

"By my faith, no!" replied the other; "on the contrary, I feel more determined than ever to follow this career; and, besides," he added, "I wish to avenge my father."

"That is just," observed the hunter.

Loyal Heart, having conducted the young man to one of his *cachés* (a sort of magazines dug in the earth in which trappers collect their wealth), produced the complete equipment of a trapper—gun, knife, pistols, game-bags, and traps—and then, after placing these things before his *protégé*,

"Go!" said he, simply, "and God speed you!"

The other looked at him without replying; he evidently did not understand him.

Loyal Heart smiled.

"You are free," resumed he; "here are all the objects necessary for your new trade—I give them to you; the desert is before you; I wish you good luck!"

The young man shook his head.

"No," said he, "I will not leave you unless you drive me from you; I am alone, without family or friends; you have saved my life and I belong to you."

"It is not my custom to receive pay for the services I render," said the hunter.

"You require to be paid for them too dearly," replied the other, warmly, "since you refuse to accept of gratitude. Take back your gifts, they are of no use to me; I am no mendicant to whom an alms can be thrown; I prefer going back and delivering myself up again to the Comanches—adieu!"

And the Canadian resolutely walked away in the direction of the Indian camp.

Loyal Heart was affected. This young man had so frank, so honest and spirited an air, that he felt something in his breast speak strongly in his favor.

"Stop!" said he. "I live alone; the existence you will pass with me will be a sad one: a great grief consumes me; why should you attach yourself to me, who am unhappy?"

"To share your griefs, if you think me worthy, and to console you, if that be possible; when man is left alone, he runs the risk of falling into despair; God has ordained that he should seek companions."

"That is true," murmured the still undecided hunter.

"At what do you pause?" asked the young man, anxiously.

Loyal Heart viewed him for a moment with attention; his eagle eye seemed to penetrate his most secret thoughts; then, doubtless satisfied with his examination, "What is your name?" said he.

"Belhumeur," replied the other, "or, if you prefer it, George Talbot; but I am generally known by the first name."

The hunter smiled.

"That is a promising name," said he, holding out his hand. "Belhumeur," added he, "from this time you are my brother; henceforth it is for life and death between us."

"For life and death," replied the Canadian, with a burst of enthusiasm, warmly pressing the hand which was held out to him.

And this was the way in which Loyal Heart and Belhumeur had become known to each other. During five years, not the least cloud, not the shadow of a cloud, had darkened the friendship which those two superior natures had sworn to each other in the desert, in the face of God. On the contrary, every day seemed to increase it; they had but one heart between them. Completely relying on each other, divining each other's most secret thoughts, these two men had seen their strength augment tenfold, and such was their reciprocal confidence, that they doubted of nothing, and undertook and carried out the most daring expeditions, in face of which ten resolute men would have paused.

But every thing succeeded with them, nothing appeared to be impossible to them; it might be said that a charm protected them, and rendered them invulnerable and invincible. Their reputation was thus spread far and near, and those whom their name did not strike with admiration repeated it with terror.

On the day we met them in the prairie, they had just been the victims of an audacious robbery, committed by their ancient enemy, Eagle's Head, the Comanche chief, whose hatred and rancor, instead of being weakened by this, had, on the contrary, only increased.

The Indian, with the characteristic deceit of his race, had dissembled, and devoured in silence the affront he had undergone from his people, and of which the two pale-faced hunters were the direct cause, and awaited patiently the hour of vengeance. He had quietly dug an abyss under the feet of his enemies, prejudicing the red-skins by degrees against them, and adroitly spreading calumnies on their

account. Thanks to this system, he had at length succeeded, or, at least, he thought he had, in making all the individuals dispersed over the prairies, even the white and half-bred hunters, consider these two men as their enemies.

As soon as this result had been obtained, Eagle's Head placed himself at the head of thirty devoted warriors; and, anxious to bring about a quarrel that might ruin the men whose death he had sworn to accomplish, he had in one single night stolen all their traps, certain that they would not leave such an insult unpunished, but would seek to avenge it.

The chief was not deceived in his calculations; all had fallen out just as he had foreseen it would. In this position he awaited his enemies. Thinking that they would find no assistance among the Indians or hunters, he flattered himself that with the thirty men he commanded he could easily seize the two hunters, whom he proposed to put to death with atrocious tortures.

But he had committed the fault of concealing the number of his warriors, in order to inspire more confidence in the hunters. The latter had only half been the dupes of this stratagem. Finding themselves sufficiently strong to contend even with twenty Indians, they had claimed the assistance of no one to avenge themselves upon enemies they despised, and had, as we have seen, set out resolutely in pursuit of the Comanches.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRACK.

EAGLE'S HEAD, who wished to be discovered by his enemies, had not taken any pains to conceal his trail. It was perfectly visible in the high grass, and if now and then it appeared to be effaced, the hunters had but slightly to incline to one side or the other to regain the prints of it.

They had never followed an enemy of this sort through the prairie. This appeared the more singular to Loyal Heart, who, for a long time, had been acquainted with the cunning of the Indians, and knew with what skill, when they judged it necessary, they caused every indication of their passage to disappear.

The facility gave him reason to reflect. As the Comanches had taken no more pains to conceal their track, they must either believe themselves very strong, or else they had prepared an ambush into which they hoped to make their too confident enemies fall.

The two hunters rode on, casting, from time to time, a look right and left, in order to be sure they were not deceived; but the track still continued in a straight line, without turnings or circuits. Belhumeur himself began to think this very extraordinary, and to be made uneasy by it.

But if the Comanches had been unwilling to take the pains of concealing the course of their march, the hunters did not follow their example; they did not advance a step without effacing the trace of their passage.

They arrived thus on the banks of a tolerably broad rivulet, named the Verdegrise, a tributary of the great Canadian river.

Before crossing this little stream, on the other side of which the hunters would no longer be very far from the Indians, Loyal Heart stopped, making a sign to his companion to do likewise.

Both dismounted, and leading their horses by the bridle, they sought the shelter of a clump of trees, in order not to be perceived, if, by chance, some Indian sentinel should be set to watch their approach.

"Before we go any further, let us consult, in order to ascertain what we had better do."

Belhumeur bent his head in sign of acquiescence.

"I suspect some treachery," resumed the hunter; "Indians are too experienced warriors, and too much accustomed to the life of the prairies, to act in this way without an imperative reason."

"That is true," replied the Canadian with a tone of conviction; "this track is too good and too plainly indicated not to conceal a snare."

"Yes, but they have wished to be too cunning; they have overshoot the mark; old hunters, like us, are not to be deceived thus. We must redouble our prudence, and examine every leaf and blade of grass with care, before we venture nearer the encampment of the red-skins."

"Let us do better," said Belhumeur, casting a look around him; "let us conceal our horses in a safe place, where we can find them again at need, and then go and reconnoiter on foot the position and the number of those we wish to surprise."

"You are right, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart; "your counsel is excellent, we will put it in practice."

"I think we had better make haste, then."

"Why so? On the contrary, do not let us hurry; the Indians, not seeing us appear, will relax in their watchfulness, and we will profit by their negligence to attack them, if we should be forced to have recourse to such extreme means; besides, it would be better to wait for the night to commence our expedition."

"In the first place, let us put our horses in safety. Afterwards, we shall see what is best to be done."

The hunters left their concealment with the greatest precaution. Instead of crossing the river, they retraced their road, and for some time followed the route they had already traversed; then they inclined a little to the left, and entered a ravine, in which they quickly disappeared among the high grass.

"I leave you to be guide, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart, "I really do not know where you are leading me!"

"Leave it to me; I have, by chance, discovered, within two gunshots of the place where we now are, a sort of citadel, where our horses will be as safe as possible, and in which, if so it should fall out, we shall be able to sustain a regular siege."

"Ha!" exclaimed the hunter, "how did you make this precious discovery?"

"Faith!" said Belhumeur, "in the simplest manner possible. I had just laid my traps, when, in climbing up the mountain before us in order to shorten my road and rejoin you more quickly, at nearly two-thirds of the ascent, I saw, protruding from the bushes, the velvety muzzle of a superb bear."

"Ah! ah! I am pretty well acquainted with that adventure. You brought me that day, if I am not mistaken, not one, but two black bear-skins."

"That is the same; my fine fellows were two, one male and the other female. You may easily suppose that at the sight of them my hunter's instincts were immediately roused; forgetful of my fatigue, I cocked my carbine, and set out in pursuit of them. You will see for yourself what sort of a fortress they had chosen," added he, alighting from his horse, Loyal Heart following his example.

Before them rose, as an amphitheater, a mass of rocks, which assumed the most curious and fantastical shapes; thin bushes sprang here and there from the interstices of the stones, climbing plants crowned the summits of the rocks, and gave to this mass, which rose more than six hundred feet above the prairie, the appearance of one of those ancient feudal ruins which are to be met with occasionally on the shores of the great rivers of Europe.

This place was named by the hunters of these plains, the White Castle, from the color of the blocks of granite which formed it.

"We shall never be able to get up there with our horses," said Loyal Heart, after having carefully surveyed for an instant the space they had to clear.

"Let us try, at all events!" said Belhumeur, pulling his horse by the bridle.

The ascent was rough, and any other horses than those of hunters, accustomed to the most difficult roads, would not have been able to accomplish it, but would have rolled from the top to the bottom.

After half an hour of extraordinary difficulties they arrived at a sort of platform, ten yards broad at most.

"This is it!" said Belhumeur, stopping.

"How—this?" replied Loyal Heart, looking around on all sides without perceiving an opening.

"Come this way!" said Belhumeur, smiling.

And still dragging his horse after him, he passed behind a block of the rock, the hunter following him with awakened curiosity.

After having walked for five minutes in a sort of trench, at most three feet wide, which seemed to wind round upon itself, the adventurers found themselves suddenly before the gaping mouth of a deep cavern.

This road, traced by one of those terrible convulsions of nature so frequent in these regions, was so well concealed behind the rocks and stones which masked it, that it was impossible to discover it but by chance.

The hunters entered.

Before ascending the mountain, Belhumeur had made a large provision of candle-wood; he lit two torches, keeping one for himself, and giving the other to his companion.

Then the grotto appeared to them in all its wild majesty. Its walls were high and covered with brilliant stalactites, which reflected back the light, multiplying it, and forming a fairylike illumination.

"This cavern," said Belhumeur, after having given his friend time to examine it in all its details, "is, I have no doubt, one of the wonders of the prairies; this gallery, which descends in a gentle declivity before us, passes under the Verdegriese, and debouches on the other side of the river, at more than a mile's advance into the plain. In addition to the gallery by which we entered, and that which is before us, there exist four others, all of which issue at dif-

ferent places. You see that here we are in no risk of being surrounded, and that these spacious chambers offer us a suite of apartments splendid enough to make the president of the United States himself jealous."

Loyal Heart, enchanted with the discovery of this refuge, wished to examine it perfectly, and although he was naturally very silent, the hunter could not at different times withhold his admiration.

"Why have you never told me of this place before?" said he to Belhumeur.

"I waited for the opportunity," replied the latter.

The hunters secured their horses, with abundance of provender, in one of the compartments of the grotto, where the light penetrated by imperceptible fissures; and then, when they were satisfied the noble animals could want for nothing during their absence, and could not escape, they threw their carbines over their shoulders, whistled to their dogs, and descended with hasty steps the gallery which passed under the river.

Soon the air became moist around them, a dull, continuous noise was heard from over their heads—they were passing under the Verdegriese. Thanks to a species of lantern, formed by a hollow rock placed as a *vedette* in the middle of the current of the river, there was light sufficient to guide them.

After half an hour's walk they debouched in the prairie by an entrance marked by bushes and creeping plants.

They had remained a long time in the grotto. In the first place, they had examined it minutely, like men who foresaw that some day or other they should stand in need of seeking a shelter there; next they had made a kind of stable for their horses; and lastly, they had snatched a hasty morsel of food, so that the sun was on the point of setting at the moment they set off again upon the track of the Comanches.

Then commenced the true Indian pursuit. The two hunters, after having laid on their bloodhounds, glided silently in their traces, creeping on their hands and knees through the high grass.

The hunters, advancing, redoubled their precautions, creeping along in parallel lines.

All at once the dogs came to a stop. The brave animals seemed to comprehend the value of silence in these places, and that a single cry would cost their masters their lives.

Belhumeur cast a piercing glance around him. His eye flashed, he gathered himself up upon himself, so to say, and bounding like a panther, he sprung upon an Indian warrior, who, with his body bent forward, and his head stooping, seemed to be sensible of the approach of an enemy.

The Indian was roughly thrown upon his back, and before he could utter a cry of distress or for help, Belhumeur had his throat in his grasp and his knee on his breast.

Then, with the greatest coolness, the hunter unsheathed his knife, and plunged it up to the hilt in the heart of his enemy.

When the savage saw that he was lost, he disdained to attempt any useless resistance, but fixing upon the Canadian a look of hatred and contempt, and he allowed death to come with a calm face.

Belhumeur replaced his knife in his belt, and pushing the body on one side,—

"One!" said he, imperturbably.

And he crept on again.

Loyal Heart had watched the movements of his friend with the greatest attention, ready to succor him if there were need; when the Indian was dead, he impassably resumed the track.

Soon the light of a fire gleamed between the trees, and an odor of roasted flesh struck the keen smell of the hunters.

They drew themselves up, like two phantoms, along an enormous cork tree, which was within a few paces of them, and embracing the knotty trunk, they soon were concealed among the tufted branches.

Then they looked out, and found they were, it might be said, hovering over the camp of the Comanches, situated within ten yards of them, at most.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAVELERS.

ABOUT the same hour that the travelers issued from the grotto, and resumed the track of the Comanches, at twenty miles' distance from them a considerable troop of white travelers stopped upon the banks of the great Canadian river, and prepared to encamp for the night in a magnificent position, where there were still some remains of an ancient halt of an Indian hunting-party.

The hunters and the half-bloods who served as guides to the travelers hastened to unload a dozen mules, escorted by United States soldiers.

With the packages they made an inclosure of an oval form, in the

interior of which they lit a fire; then, without troubling themselves any more about their companions, the guides united together in a little group and prepared their evening repast.

A young officer, of about twenty-five years of age, of martial bearing, with delicately-marked features, went up respectfully to a light covered wagon drawn by two mules and escorted by two horsemen.

"In what place would you wish, General, the tent of Miss Harwood to be pitched?" asked the young officer, uncovering.

"Where you please, Captain Aguilar, provided it be quickly done; my niece is sinking with fatigue," replied the General, who kept on the right of the wagon.

He was a man of lofty stature, of hard, marked features, and the eye of an eagle, whose hair was as white as the snows of Chimborazo, and who, under the large military cloak which he wore, allowed glimpses to appear of the uniform of a United States general.

The captain retired, and turning to the soldiers, he gave them orders to establish, in the middle of the camp-inclosure, a pretty tent, striped rose-color and blue, carried across the back of a mule.

The General, dismounting, offered his hand gallantly to a young female, who sprung lightly from the wagon, and he conducted her to the tent, where, thanks to the attentions of Captain Aguilar, every thing was so prepared that she found herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Behind the General and his niece, two other persons entered the tent.

One was short and stout, with a full, rosy face, green spectacles, and a light-colored wig, who looked to be choking in the uniform of a surgeon.

This personage, whose age was a problem, but who appeared to be about fifty, was a Frenchman, who had joined the service in New Orleans.

On alighting from his horse, he had seized and placed under his arm, with a species of respect, a large valise fastened to the hinder part of his saddle, and from which he seemed unwilling to part.

The second person was a girl of about fifteen years of age, of a forward and lively mien, with a turn-up nose and a bold look, belonging to the half-bred race, who served as waiting-maid to the general's niece.

A superb negro, decorated with the majestic name of Jupiter, hastened, aided by two or three of the half-breeds, to prepare the supper.

"Well, doctor," said the General, smiling, to the fat man, who came in puffing like a bullock, and sat down upon his valise, "how do you find my niece this evening?"

"Mademoiselle is always charming!" replied the doctor, gallantly, wiping his brow. "Don't you find the heat very oppressive?"

"Faith! no," replied the general, "not more so than usual. Has to-day's journey fatigued you much, my dear niece?"

"Not exceedingly," said the young lady, with a suppressed gape; "during nearly a month that we have been traveling I have become accustomed to this sort of life, which, I confess, at the commencement I found painful enough."

The General sighed, but made no reply. The doctor was absorbed by the care with which he was classing the plants and stones which he had collected during the day.

Phoebe, the waiting-maid, flew about the tent like a bird, occupied in putting every thing in order that her mistress might want.

We will take advantage of this amount of respite to sketch the portrait of the young lady.

Kate Harwood was the daughter of a younger sister of the General. She was a charming girl of sixteen, at most. Her large black eyes, crowned by brows whose deep tint contrasted finely with the whiteness of her fair, pure forehead, were veiled by long, velvety lashes, which modestly concealed the splendor of them; her little mouth was set off by teeth of pearl, edged by lips of coral; her delicate skin wore the down of the ripe peach, and her blue-black hair, when liberated from its bands, formed a veil for her whole person. Her form was slender with all the curves of the true line of beauty. She possessed, in an eminent degree, that undulating, gracefully serpentine movement which distinguishes Americans; her hands and feet were of extreme smallness, and her step had the careless voluptuousness of the creole, so full of ever-varying attractions. She was gay and cheerful; amused with the smallest trifle, and knowing nothing of life but the agreeable side of it.

Brought up, under the care of the General, in a Catholic school in New Orleans, she had only quitted it to accompany him in a journey he had undertaken through the prairies.

What was the object of this journey, and why had her uncle so positively insisted upon her making it with him? That was of little consequence to the young girl.

Happy to live in the open air, to be constantly seeing new countries and new objects, to be free in comparison with the life she had hitherto led, she had asked nothing better and took care never to

trouble her uncle with indiscreet questions. At the period we meet her, then, Kate Harwood is a happy girl, living from day to day, satisfied with the present, thinking nothing of the future.

Captain Aguilar entered, preceding Jupiter, who brought in the dinner. The repast consisted of conserves and a joint of roast venison. Four persons took their places round the table; the General, his niece, the captain, and the doctor. Jupiter and Phoebe waited.

Conversation languished during the first course; but when the appetite of the party was a little abated, the young girl, who delighted in teasing the doctor, turning to him, said,

"Have you made a rich harvest to-day, doctor?"

"Not too rich, mademoiselle," replied he.

"Well, but," said she, laughing, "there appears to me to be such an abundance of stones on our route, that it only rested with yourself to gather together enough to load a mule."

"You ought to be pleased with your journey," said the General; "it offers you such an opportunity for indulging in your passion for plants of all sorts."

"Not too great, General, I must confess; the prairie is not so rich as I thought it was; and if it were not for the hope I entertain of discovering one plant whose qualities may advance science, I should almost regret my little house at Guadaloupe, where my life glided away in such uniform tranquillity."

"Bah!" interrupted the captain, "we are as yet only on the frontiers of the prairies. You will find, when we have penetrated further into the interior, that you will not be able to gather the riches which will spring up under your feet."

"God grant it may be so, captain," said the doctor, with a sigh; "provided I find the plant I seek I shall be satisfied."

"Is it, then, such a very valuable plant?" asked Miss Harwood.

"How?" cried the doctor, warming with the question. "A plant which Linnæus has described and classified, and which no one has since found! a plant that would make my reputation! And do you ask me if it is valuable?"

"Of what use is it then?" asked the young lady, in a tone of curiosity.

"Of what use is it?"

"Yes."

"Of none that I am aware of," replied the doctor, ingenuously.

Kate broke into a silvery laugh, whose pearly notes might have made a nightingale jealous.

"And you call it a valuable plant?"

"Yes—for its rarity even."

"Ah! that's all."

"Let us hope you will find it, doctor," said the General, in a conciliatory tone. "Jupiter, call the chief of the guides hither."

The negro left the tent, and almost immediately returned, followed by the half-breed leader, who was a man of about forty, tall in stature, square-built, and muscular. His physiognomy, without being ugly, had something repulsive in it, for which the spectator was at a loss to account; his wild, sinister-looking eyes, buried under their orbits, cast a savage light, which, with his low brow, and curly hair, and his coppered complexion, made altogether a not very agreeable whole. He wore the costume of a wanderer of the woods; was cold, impassible, of a nature essentially taciturn, and answered to the name of the *Babbler*, which, no doubt, the Indians or his companions had given him by antiphrasis.

"Here, my brave," said the General, holding out to him a glass full to the brim of a sort of brandy, called mezcal, from the name of the place where it is fabricated, "drink this."

The hunter bowed, emptied the glass, which contained about a pint, at a draught; then, passing the end of his sleeve across his mustache, waited.

"I wish," said the General, "to halt for a few days, in some safe position, in order to make, without fear of being disturbed, certain researches: shall we be secure here?"

The eye of the guide sparkled: he fixed a burning glance upon the General.

"No," replied he, laconically.

"And why not?"

"Too many Indians and wild beasts."

"Do you know one more suitable?"

"Yes."

"Far off?"

"No."

"At what distance?"

"Forty miles."

"How long will it take us to arrive there?"

"Three days."

"That will do; conduct us thither. To-morrow, at sunrise, we will set forward on our march."

"Is that all?"

"That is all." And the hunter retired.

"What I admire in the Babbler," said the captain, smiling, "is that his conversation never tires you."

"I should like it much better if he spoke more," said the doctor, shaking his head. "I always suspect people who are afraid of saying too much; they generally have something to conceal."

The guide, after leaving the tent, joined his companions, with whom he began to talk in a low voice, but in a very animated manner.

The night was magnificent; the travelers, assembled in front of the tent, were chatting together and smoking their cigars. Kate was singing one of those charming creole songs which are so full of sweet melody and expression.

All at once, a red-tinted light appeared in the horizon, increasing every instant, and a dull, continuous noise, like the growling of distant thunder, was heard.

"What is that?" cried the General, rising hastily.

"The prairie is on fire," replied the Babbler, quietly.

At this terrible announcement, made so quietly, the camp was all in confusion. It was necessary to fly instantly, if they did not choose to run the risk of being burnt alive.

One of the half-breeds, profiting by the disorder, glided away among the baggage, and disappeared in the plain.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMANCHES.

LOYAL HEART and Belhumeur, concealed among the tufted branches of the cork-trees, were observing the Comanches. The Indians depended upon the vigilance of their sentinels. Far from suspecting that their enemies were so near them and were watching their motions, crouched or lying around the fires, they were eating or smoking carelessly.

These savages, to the number of twenty-five, were dressed in their bison-skins, and painted in the most fantastic manner. Most of them had their faces covered with vermillion; others were entirely black, with a long white stripe upon each cheek; they wore their bucklers at their backs with their bows and arrows, and near them lay their guns. By the number of wolves' tails fastened to their moccasins, and which dragged on the ground behind them, it was easy to perceive that they were all chosen warriors, renowned in their tribe.

At some paces from the group, Eagle's Head stood motionless against a tree. With his arms crossed on his breast, and leaning gently forward, he seemed to be listening to vague noises, perceptible to him alone. Eagle's Head was an Osage Indian; the Comanches had adopted him when quite young, but he had always preserved the costume and manners of his nation.

He was, at most, twenty-eight years of age, nearly six feet high, and his large limbs, upon which enormous muscles developed themselves, denoted extraordinary strength. Contrary to the dress of his companions, he only wore a covering fastened round his loins, so as to leave his bust and his arms bare. The expression of his countenance was handsome and noble; his black, animated eyes, close to his elevated nose, and his somewhat large mouth, gave him a faint resemblance to a bird of prey. His hair was shaved off with the exception of a lock upon the middle of his head, which produced the effect of the crest of a helmet. A long scalping-knife to which was attached a bunch of eagle's feathers hung down behind him. His face was painted of four different colors—blue, white, black and red; the wounds inflicted by him upon his enemies were marked in blue upon his naked breast. Moccasins of untanned deer-skin ascended above his knees, and numerous wolves' tails were fastened to his heels.

Fortunately for the hunters, the Indians were on the war-path, and had no dogs with them; but for this, they would have been discovered long before, and could not possibly have approached so near the camp.

In spite of his statue-like immobility, the eye of the chief sparkled, his nostrils expanded, and he lifted his right arm mechanically, as if to impose silence upon his warriors.

"We are all but discovered!" murmured Loyal Heart, in a voice so low that his companion hardly could hear it.

"What is to be done?" replied Belhumeur,

"Act," said the trapper, laconically.

Both then glided silently from the tree, crouching along the ground till they came to the opposite side of the camp, just above the place where the horses of the Comanches were grazing, tied together. Belhumeur cut the thongs that held them; and the horses, excited by the whips of the hunters, rushed out neighing and kicking in all directions. The Indians rose in disorder and hastened, with loud cries in search of their animals.

Eagle's Head alone, as if he had guessed the spot where his enemies were in ambush, directed his steps straight toward them, screening himself as much as possible behind the trees in his passage.

The hunters drew back, step by step, looking carefully round them, so as not to allow themselves to be encompassed.

The cries of the Indians grew fainter in the distance; they were all in eager pursuit of their horses.

The chief found himself alone in front of his two enemies.

On arriving at a tree whose enormous trunk seemed to guarantee the desired safety, disdaining to use his gun, and the opportunity seeming favorable, he adjusted an arrow on his bow-string. But whatever might be his prudence and address, he could not make this movement without discovering himself a little. Loyal Heart lifted his gun, the trigger was pressed, the ball hissed, the chief bounded into the air, uttering a howl of rage, and fell upon the ground.

His arm was broken. The two hunters were already close to him.

"Not a motion, red-skin," said Loyal Heart to him; "not a motion or you are a dead man!"

The Indian remained motionless, impassible in appearance, devouring his rage.

"I could kill you," continued the hunter; "but I am not willing to do so. This is the second time I have given you your life, chief, but it will be the last. Cross my path no more, and, above all, do not steal my traps again; if you do, I swear I will grant you no mercy."

"Eagle's Head is a chief renowned among the men of his tribe," replied the Indian with pride; "he does not fear death; the white hunter may kill him, he will not hear him complain."

"No, I will not kill you, chief; my God forbids the shedding of the blood of man unnecessarily."

"Oah!" said the Indian, with an ironical smile; "my brother is a missionary."

"No, I am an honest trapper, and do not wish to be an assassin."

"My brother speaks the words of old women," replied the Indian; "Nehunutah never pardons; he avenges."

"You will do as you please, chief," replied the hunter, with disdain; "I have no power to change your nature; only remember you are warned—farewell."

"And Satan caress you!" added Belhumeur, giving him a contemptuous shove with his foot.

The chief appeared insensible even to this fresh insult, only his brows contracted slightly. He did not stir, but followed his enemies with an implacable look, while they, without troubling themselves more about him, plunged into the forest.

"Say what you will, Loyal Heart," said Belhumeur, "you are wrong, you ought to have killed him."

"Bah! what for?" replied the hunter, carelessly.

"What for? Why there would have been one head of vermin the less in the prairie."

"Where there are so many," said the other, "one more or less can not signify much."

"Humph! that's true!" replied Belhumeur, apparently convinced; "but where are we going now?"

"To look after my traps; do you think I will lose them?"

"Humph! that's a good thought."

The hunters advanced really in the direction of the camp, but in the Indian fashion—that is to say, by making turnings and windings without number, for the purpose of concealing their track from the Comanches.

After progressing in this way for twenty minutes, they arrived at the camp. The Indians had not yet returned; but, in all probability, it would not be long before they would do so. Their baggage was scattered here and there. Two or three horses, which had not felt disposed to run away, were browsing quietly.

Without losing time, the hunters set about collecting their traps, which was soon done. Each loaded himself with five, and without further delay they resumed their way to the cavern where they had concealed their horses.

Notwithstanding the tolerably heavy weight they carried on their shoulders, the two men marched lightly, much pleased at having so happily terminated their expedition, and laughing at the trick they had played the Indians.

They had gone on thus for some time, and could already hear the murmur of the distant water of the river, when, all at once, the neighing of a horse struck their ears.

"We are pursued," said Loyal Heart, stopping.

"Hum!" said Belhumeur, "it is, perhaps a wild horse."

"No, a wild horse does not neigh in that manner; it is the Comanches; but they are not following a full track—they are hesitating."

"Or perhaps their march is retarded by the wound of Eagle's Head."

"That's possible! Oh! oh! do they think themselves, then, able to catch us, if we wished to escape from them?"

"Ah! if we were not loaded, that would soon be done."

Loyal Heart reflected a minute.

"Come," said he, "we have still half an hour, and that is more than we want."

A rivulet was flowing at a short distance from them; the hunters entered its bed.

When arrived at the middle of the current, Loyal Heart carefully wrapped up the traps in a buffalo-skin, that no harm might come to them, and then he allowed them quietly to drop to the bottom of the stream.

This precaution taken, the hunters crossed the rivulet, and made a false track of about two hundred paces, afterwards coming back with precaution, in order not to leave a print that might betray their return. They then again entered the forest, after having, with a gesture, sent the dogs to the horses. The intelligent animals obeyed, and soon disappeared in the distance.

This resolution to send away the dogs was useful in assisting to throw the Indians off the track, for they could scarcely miss following the traces left by the bloodhounds in the high grass.

Once in the forest, the hunters again climbed into a tree, and awaited the coming of their enemies, who drew nearer and nearer, and whom they soon perceived under them, marching in Indian file, that is to say, one behind another. Eagle's Head came first, half lying upon his horse, on account of his wound, but more animated than ever in pursuit of his enemies. The Indians passed without seeing them.

"Ouf!" said Belhumeur, at the end of a minute. "I think we have got rid of them this time!"

"Do not cry before you are out of the wood, but let us get on as fast as we can; these demons are cunning; they will not long be the dupes of our stratagem."

"Hold!" cried the Canadian. "I have let my knife fall, I don't know where; if these devils find it, we are lost."

"Most likely," murmured Loyal Heart; "the greater reason for not losing a single minute."

In the mean time, the forest, which till then had been calm, began all at once to growl sullenly, the birds flew about uttering cries of fear, and in the thick underwood they could hear the dry branches crack under the steps of the wild animals.

"What's going on now?" said Loyal Heart, stopping, and looking round him with uneasiness; "the forest appears seized with a vertigo!"

The hunters sprang up to the top of the tree in which they were, and which happened to be one of the loftiest in the forest.

An immense light tinged the horizon at about a league from the spot they were on; this light increased every minute, and advanced toward them with giant steps.

"Curses on them!" cried Belhumeur; "the Comanches have set fire to the prairie."

"Yes, and I believe this time that, as you said just now, we are lost," replied Loyal Heart, coolly.

"What's to be done?" said the Canadian; "in an instant we shall be surrounded."

Loyal Heart reflected seriously.

At the end of a few seconds he raised his head, a smile of triumph curling the corners of his mouth.

"They have not got us yet," said he; "follow me, my brother;" and he added in a low voice, "I will see my mother again!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRESERVER.

In order to make the reader comprehend the position of the hunters, it is necessary to go back to the Comanche chief. Scarcely had his enemies disappeared among the trees, when Eagle's Head raised himself softly up, bent his body forward, and listened to ascertain if they were really gone. As soon as he had acquired that certainty, he tore off a morsel of his blanket-covering, with which he wrapped up his arm as well as he could, and, in spite of the weakness produced by loss of blood and the pain he suffered, he set off resolutely in the traces of the hunters.

He accompanied them, without being seen, to the limits of the camp. There concealed, he was witness, without being able to oppose it, though boiling with rage, to the search made by the hunters for their traps, and, at length, of their departure after having recovered them.

Although the bloodhounds which the hunters had with them were excellent dogs, trained to scent an Indian from a distance, by a providential chance, which probably saved the life of the Comanche chief, they had fallen upon the remains of the repast of the red-skins, and

their masters, not dreaming of being watched, did not think of commanding their vigilance.

The Comanches at length regained their camp, after having, with infinite difficulty, succeeded in catching their horses.

The sight of their wounded chief caused them great surprise, and still greater anger, of which Eagle's Head took advantage to set them all off again in pursuit of the hunters, who, retarded by the traps they carried, could not be far off, and could not fail of quickly falling into their hands.

They had been but for an instant the dupes of the stratagem invented by Loyal Heart, and had not been long in recognizing unequivocal traces of the passage of their enemies.

It was then, ashamed of being thus held in check by two determined men, whose cunning, superior to their own, deceived all their calculations, that Eagle's Head resolved to put an end to them at once, by carrying into execution the diabolical project of setting fire to the forest; a means which, according to the manner in which he meant to employ it, must, he did not doubt, at length deliver his adversaries up to him.

In consequence, dispersing his warriors in various directions, he ordered the high grass to be set fire to in various places at once.

The idea, though barbarous, and worthy of the savage warriors who employed it, was a good one. The hunters, after having vainly endeavored to escape from the network of fire which enveloped them on all sides, would be obliged, in spite of themselves, if they did not prefer being burnt alive, to surrender quickly to their ferocious enemies.

Eagle's Head had calculated and foreseen every thing, except the most easy and most simple thing, the only chance of safety that would be left to Loyal Heart and his companion.

As we have said, at the command of their chief the warriors had dispersed, and had lighted the conflagration at several points at once. At this advanced season of the year, the plants and grass, parched by the incandescent rays of the summer's sun, were immediately in a blaze, and the fire extended in all directions with frightful rapidity—not, however, so quickly as not to allow a certain time to elapse before it united.

Loyal Heart had not hesitated. Whilst the Indians were running like demons around the barrier of flame they had just opposed to their enemies, and were uttering howlings of joy, the hunter, followed by his friend, had rushed at full speed between two walls of fire, which from right and left advanced upon him, hissing, and threatening to unite at once above his head and beneath his feet. Amidst calcined trees which fell with a crash, blinded by clouds of thick smoke which stopped their respiration, burnt by showers of sparks which poured upon them from all parts, following boldly their course beneath a vault of flame, the intrepid adventurers had cleared, at the cost of a few inconsequent burns, the accursed enclosure in which the Indians had thought to bury them for ever, and were already far from the enemies who were congratulating themselves upon the success of their artful and barbarous plan.

The conflagration, in the mean time, assumed formidable proportions; the forest shriveled up under the grasp of the fire; the prairie was nothing but one sheet of flame, in the midst of which the wild animals, driven from their dens and lairs by this unexpected catastrophe, ran about, mad with terror. The sky gleamed with blood-like reflections, and an impetuous wind swept before it both flames and smoke. The Indians themselves were terrified at their own work, on seeing around them entire mountains lighted up like sinister pharos; the earth became hot, and immense troops of bisons made the earth tremble with their furious course, uttering those brayings of despair which fill with terror the hearts of the bravest men.

Thus it was that the camp of General Harwood was endangered; victims, upon whom the Comanches had not counted, seemed about to be sacrificed.

In the camp of the American travelers, every thing was in the greatest disorder; it was all noise and frightful confusion. The horses had broken their shackles, and fled away in all directions; the men seized their arms and ammunition; others carried the saddles and packages. Every one was crying, swearing, commanding—all were running about without apparent aim.

The fire continued to advance, swallowing up every thing in its passage, preceded by a countless number of animals of all kinds, who bounded along with howlings of fear, pursued by the scourge which threatened to overtake them at every step. A thick smoke laden with sparks, was already passing over the camp of the travelers; twenty minutes more and all would be over with them. The General, pressing his niece in his arms, in vain demanded of the guides the best means of avoiding the peril which threatened.

These men, terrified by the imminence of that peril, had lost all self-possession. And then, what remedy could be employed? The flames formed an immense circle, of which the camp had become the center.

The strong breeze, however, which to that moment had kept alive the conflagration, by lending it wings, had sunk all at once. There

was not a breath of air. The march of the fire slackened. Providence granted these unhappy creatures a few minutes more.

At this moment the camp presented a strange aspect. All the men, struck with terror, had lost the sense even of self-preservation. The guides were plunged in despair. The General accused Heaven of the misfortune. As for the doctor, he only regretted the plant he could not discover; with him every other consideration yielded to that. Kate, with her hands clasped, and her knees on the ground, was praying with fervor. The fire still continued to approach, with its *avante-garde* of wild beasts.

"Oh!" cried the General, shaking the arm of the guide violently, "will you leave us to be burnt thus, without an effort to save us?"

"What can be done against the will of God?" replied the Babbler, impassibly.

"Are there no means, then, of preserving us from death?"

"None!"

"There are!" cried a man who, with a scorched face, and half-burnt hair, rushed into the camp, climbing over the baggage, followed by another individual.

"Who are you?" cried the General.

"That is of little importance," replied the stranger, dryly; "I come to save you! My companion and I were out of danger; to succor you we have braved further perils—that should satisfy you. Your safety is in your own hands; you have only to will it."

"Command!" replied the general; "I will be the first to give you the example of obedience."

"Have you no guides with you, then?"

"Certainly we have," said the General.

"Then they are traitors or cowards, for the means I am about to employ are known to every body in the prairie."

The General darted a glance of mistrust at the Babbler, who had not been able to suppress an appearance of disagreeable surprise at the sudden coming of the two unknown.

"Well," said the hunter, "that is an account you can settle with them hereafter; we have something else to think of now."

The travelers, at the sight of this determined man, had instinctively beheld a preserver; they had felt their courage revive with hope, and held themselves ready to execute his orders with promptness.

"Be quick," said the hunter, "and pull up all the grass that surrounds the camp."

Every one set himself to work at once.

"On our part," continued the stranger, addressing the General, "we will take wetted coverings and spread them before the baggage."

The General, the captain, and the doctor, under the directions of the hunter, did as he desired, whilst his companion lassoed the horses and the mules, and shackled them in the centre of the camp.

"Be quick! be quick!" cried the hunter, incessantly; "the fire gains upon us!"

Every one redoubled his exertions, and, in a short time, a large space was cleared.

Miss Harwood surveyed with admiration this strange man, who had suddenly appeared among them in such a providential manner, and who was, amidst the horrible danger that enveloped them, as calm and self-possessed as if he had the power to command the awful scourge which continued to advance upon them with giant steps. The young girl could not withdraw her looks from him; in spite of herself, she felt attracted toward this unknown preserver, whose voice, gestures, his whole person, in short, interested her.

When the grass and herbs had been pulled up with that feverish rapidity which men in fear of death give to all they do, the hunter smiled calmly.

"Now," said he, addressing the travelers, "the rest concerns me and my friend; leave us to act as we think proper; envelop yourselves carefully in wetted coverings of some kind."

Every one followed his direction.

The stranger cast a glance around him, and then, after making a sign to his friend, walked straight toward the fire.

"I shall not quit you," said the General, earnestly.

"Come on, then," replied the stranger, laconically.

When arrived at the extremity of the space where the grass had been pulled up, the hunter made a heap of plants and dry wood with his feet, and scattering a little gunpowder over it, he set fire to the mass.

"What are you doing?" cried the General in amazement.

"You see, I make fire fight against fire," replied the hunter, quietly. His companion had acted in the same manner in an opposite direction. A curtain of flames arose rapidly round them, and, for some minutes, the camp was almost concealed beneath a vault of fire. A quarter of an hour of terrible anxiety and intense expectation ensued.

By degrees the flames became less fierce, the air more pure; the smoke dispersed, the roaring of the conflagration diminished. At length they were able to recognize each other in this terrible chaos. A sigh of relief exhaled from every breast.

The camp was saved!

The conflagration, whose roaring became gradually more dull

conquered by the hunter, went to convey destruction in other directions. Every one rushed toward the stranger to thank him.

"You have saved the life of my niece," said the General, with warmth; "how shall I discharge my debt to you?"

"You owe me nothing," replied the hunter; "in the prairie all men are brothers; I have only performed my duty in coming to your assistance."

As soon as the first moments of joy were past, and the camp had been put in a little order, every one felt the necessity for repose after the terrible anxieties of the night.

The two strangers, who had constantly repulsed with modesty, but with firmness, the advances the General had made in the warmth of his gratitude, threw themselves carelessly upon the baggage for a few hours' rest.

A little before dawn they arose.

"The earth must be cool by this time," said the hunter; "let us be gone before these people are awake; perhaps they would not wish us to leave them so."

At the moment he was about to pass over the boundary of the camp, a hand was laid lightly upon the shoulder of the elder. He turned round, and Miss Harwood was before him.

The two men stopped and bowed respectfully to the young lady.

"Are you leaving us?"

"We must, lady," replied the hunter.

"I understand," said she with a smile; "now that, thanks to you, we are saved, you have nothing more to do here—is it not so?"

The two men bowed without replying.

"Grant me a favor," said she.

"Name it."

She took from her neck a little diamond cross she wore.

"Keep this in remembrance of me."

The hunter hesitated.

"I beg you will," murmured she, in an agitated voice.

"I accept it, lady," said the hunter, placing the cross upon his breast close to his scapulary; "I shall have another talisman to add to that my mother has given me."

"Thank you," replied the girl joyfully; "one word more!"

"Speak it, lady."

"What are your names?"

"My companion is called Belhumeur."

"But you?"

"Loyal Heart."

After having bowed a second time, in sign of adieu, the two hunters departed at a quick pace, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

Kate followed them with her eyes as long as she could perceive them, and then returned slowly and pensively toward her tent, repeating to herself in a low but earnest tone,

"Loyal Heart! Oh! I shall remember that."

CHAPTER VI.

THE INTRENCHED CAMP.

WE will leave the hunters to follow the track of the red-skins, and return to the General.

A few minutes after the two men had quitted the camp, the General left his tent, and while inhaling the fresh air of the morning, he began to walk about in a preoccupied manner. The events of the night had produced a lively impression upon the old soldier.

For the first time, perhaps, since he had undertaken this expedition, he began to see it in its true light. He asked himself if he had really the right to associate with him, in this life of continual perils and ambushes, a girl of the age of his niece, whose existence, up to this time, had been nothing but a continued series of mild and peaceful emotions; and who probably would not be able to accustom herself to the incessant dangers and agitations of a life in the prairies, which, in a short time, would break down the energies of the strongest minds.

His perplexity was great. He adored his niece; she was his only object of love, his only consolation. For her he would, without regret or hesitation, a thousand times sacrifice all he possessed; but, on the other side, the reasons which had obliged him to undertake this perilous journey were of such importance that he trembled, and felt a cold sweat come over his brow, at the thought of renouncing it.

"What is to be done?" said he. "What is to be done?"

Kate, who was in her turn leaving her tent, perceived her uncle, and, running toward him, threw her arms affectionately round his neck.

"Good-day, uncle," said she, kissing him.

"Good-day, my daughter," replied the General. He was accustomed to call her so. "Eh! eh! my child, you are very gay this morning."

And he returned with interest the caresses she had lavished upon him.

"Why should I not be gay, uncle? Thanks to God! we have just escaped a great peril; every thing in nature seems to smile; the birds are singing upon every branch; the sun inundates us with warm rays; we should be ungrateful toward the Creator if we remained insensible to these manifestations of His goodness."

"Then the perils of last night have left no distressing impression upon your mind, my dear child?"

"None at all, uncle, except a deep sense of gratitude for the benefits God has favored us with."

"That is well, my daughter," replied the General joyfully; "I am happy to hear you speak thus."

"That makes all still better, if I please you, uncle."

"Then," replied the General, following up the idea of his preoccupation, "the life we are now leading is not fatiguing to you?"

"Oh, not at all; on the contrary, I find it very agreeable; and, above all, full of incidents," said she, smiling.

"Yes," said the General, partaking her gayety; "but," added he, becoming serious again, "I think we are too forgetful of our liberators."

"They are gone," replied the young girl.

"Gone?" said the General, with great surprise.

"Full an hour ago."

"How do you know that, my child?"

"Very simply, uncle; they bade me adieu before they left us."

"That is not right," murmured the General, in a tone of vexation; "a service is as binding upon those who bestow it as upon those who receive it; they should not have abandoned us thus without bidding me farewell, without telling us whether we should ever see them again, leaving us even unacquainted with their names."

"I know them."

"You know them, my daughter?" said the general, with astonishment.

"Yes, uncle; before they went, they told me."

"And—what are they?" asked the General, eagerly.

"The younger is named Belhumeur."

"And the elder?"

"Loyal Heart."

"Oh! I must find these two men again," said the General, with an emotion he could not account for.

"Who knows?" replied the young girl, meditatively, "perhaps in the very first danger that threatens us they will make their appearance as our benevolent genii."

"God grant we may not owe their return among us to a similar cause."

The captain came in to pay the compliments of the morning.

"Well, captain," said the General, smiling, "have your men got over the effects of their alarm?"

"Perfectly, General," replied the young man, "and are quite ready to proceed, whenever you please to give the order."

"After breakfast we will strike our tents; have the goodness to give the necessary orders to the troops, and send the Babbler to me."

The captain bowed and retired.

"On your part, niece," continued the General, addressing Kate, "superintend the preparations for breakfast, if you please, while I talk to our guide."

The young girl tripped away, and the Babbler almost immediately entered.

His air was dull, and his manner more reserved than usual.

The General took no notice of this.

"You remember," said he, "that you yesterday manifested an intention of finding a spot where we might conveniently encamp for a few days?"

"Yes, General."

"You told me you were acquainted with a situation that would perfectly suit our purpose?"

"Yes, General."

"Are you prepared to conduct us thither?"

"When you please."

"What time will it require to gain this spot?"

"Two days."

"Very well. We will set out, then, immediately after breakfast."

The Babbler bowed, without reply.

"By the way," said the General, with feigned indifference, "one of your men seems to be missing."

"There is."

"What is become of him?"

"I don't know."

"How! you don't know?" said the General, with a scrutinizing glance.

"No; as soon as he saw the fire, terror seized him, and he escaped. He is most probably the victim of his cowardice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The fire, most likely, has devoured him."

"Do you know the two hunters who rendered us such timely service?"

"We all know each other on the prairie."

"What are those men?"

"Hunters and trappers."

"That is not what I ask you."

"What, then?"

"I mean as to their character."

"Oh!" said the guide, with an appearance of displeasure.

"Yes, their moral character."

"I don't know any thing about them."

"What are their names?"

"Belhumeur and Loyal Heart."

"And you know nothing of their lives?"

"Nothing."

"That will do—you may retire."

The guide bowed, and with tardy steps rejoined his companions, who were preparing for departure.

"Hum!" murmured the General, following him with his eyes, "I must keep a watch upon that fellow; there is something sinister in his manner."

The General entered his tent, where the doctor, the captain, and Miss Harwood were waiting breakfast for him.

Half an hour later, the tent was folded up again, the packages were placed upon the mules, and the caravan was pursuing its journey under the direction of the Babbler, who rode about twenty paces in advance of the troupe.

The aspect of the prairie was much changed since the preceding evening. The black, burnt earth, was covered in places with heaps of smoking ashes; here and there, charred trees, still standing, displayed their saddening skeletons; the fire still roared at a distance, and clouds of coppery smoke concealed the horizon.

The horses advanced with precaution over this uneven ground, where they were constantly stumbling over the bones of animals that had been victims to the terrible embraces of the flames.

The road the caravan was pursuing wound along a narrow ravine, the dried bed of some torrent, deeply inclosed between two hills. The ground trodden by the horses was composed of round pebbles, which slipped from under their hoofs, and augmented the difficulties of the march, rendered still more toilsome by the burning rays of the sun, which fell directly upon the travelers, leaving no chance of escaping them, for the country over which they were traveling had completely assumed the appearance of one vast desert.

The day passed away thus, without having the monotony of the journey broken by any incident. In the evening they encamped in a plain absolutely bare, but in the horizon they could perceive an appearance of verdure, which afforded them great consolation; they were about, at last, to enter a zone spared by the conflagration.

The next morning, two hours before sunrise, the Babbler gave orders for preparations for departure. The day proved more fatiguing than the former; the travelers were literally worn out when they encamped.

The Babbler had not deceived the General. The site was admirably chosen to repel an attack of the Indians. We need not describe it; the reader is already acquainted with it. It was the spot on which we met the hunters, when they appeared on the scene for the first time.

The General having cast around him the glance of the experienced soldier, could not help manifesting his satisfaction.

"Bravo!" said he to the guide; "if we have had almost insurmountable difficulties to encounter in getting here, we could at least, if so things should fall out, sustain a siege on this spot."

The guide made no reply; he bowed with an equivocal smile, and retired.

"It is surprising," murmured the General to himself, "however loyal that man's conduct may be in appearance, and however impossible it may be to reproach him with the least thing—in spite of all that, I can not divest myself of the presentiment that he is deceiving us, and that he is contriving some diabolical project against us."

The General was an old soldier of considerable experience, who would never leave any thing to chance, that fate which in a second destroys the best contrived plans.

Notwithstanding the fatigue of his people, he would not lose a moment; aided by the captain, he had an enormous number of trees cut down, to form a solid intrenchment, protected by a *chevaux de frise*. Behind this intrenchment the troops dug a wide ditch, of which they threw out the earth to the side of the camp; and then, behind this second intrenchment, the baggage was piled up, to make a third and last inclosure.

The tent was pitched in the center of the camp, the sentinels were placed, and every one else went to seek that repose of which they stood so much in need.

The General, who intended sojourning on this spot for some time, wished, as far as it could be possible, to assure the safety of his companions, and, thanks to his minute precautions, he believed he had succeeded.

For two days the travelers had been marching along execrable roads, almost without sleep, only stopping to snatch a morsel of food; as we have said, they were quite worn out with fatigue. Notwithstanding, then, their desire to keep awake, the sentinels could not resist the sleep which overpowered them, and they were not long in sinking into as complete a forgetfulness as their companions.

Toward midnight, at the moment when every one in the camp was plunged in sleep, a man rose softly, and creeping along in the shade, with the quickness of a reptile, but with extreme precaution, he glided out of the barricades and intrenchments.

He then went down upon the ground, and by degrees, in a manner almost insensibly, upon his hands and knees, directed his course through the high grass toward a forest which covered the first ascent of the hill, and extended some way into the prairie.

When arrived at a certain distance, safe from discovery, he rose up. A moonbeam, passing between two clouds, threw a light upon his countenance.

That man was the Babler.

He looked round anxiously, turned his ear, and then, with incredible perfection, imitated the cry of the dog of the prairies.

Almost instantly the same cry was repeated, and a man rose up within at most ten paces of the Babler. That man was the guide who, three days before, had escaped from the camp on the first appearance of the conflagration.

Indians and wanderers of the woods have two languages, of which they make use by turns, according to circumstances—spoken language, and the language of gestures.

The Babler and his companion were conversing by gestures.

This singular conversation lasted nearly an hour; it appeared to interest the interlocutors warmly; so warmly, indeed, that they did not remark, in spite of all the precautions they had taken not to be surprised, two fiery eyes that, from under a tuft of underwood, were fixed upon them.

At length the Babler, risking the enunciation of a few words, said,

"I await your good pleasure."

"And you shall not wait long," replied the other.

"I depend upon you, Kennedy; for my part, I have fulfilled my promise."

"That's well! that's well! We don't require many words to come to an understanding," said Kennedy, shrugging his shoulders; "only you need not have conducted them to so strong a position—it will not be very easy to surprise them."

"That's your concern," said the Babler, with an evil smile.

His companion looked at him for a moment with great attention.

"Hum!" said he; "beware, comrade, it is almost always awkward to play a double game with men like us."

"I am playing no double game; but I think you and I have known each other a pretty considerable time, Kennedy, have we not?"

"What follows?"

"What follows? Well! I am not disposed that that should happen to me again that has happened before, that's all."

"Do you draw back, or do you think about betraying us?"

"I do not draw back, and I have not the least intention of betraying you, only—"

"Only?" repeated the other.

"This time I will not give up to you what I have promised till my conditions shall be agreed to pretty plainly; if not, no—"

"Well, at least that's frank."

"People should speak plainly in business affairs," observed the Babler, shaking his head.

"That's true! Well! come, repeat me the conditions; I will see if we can accept them."

"What's the good of that? You are not the principal chief, are you?"

"No; but yet—"

"You could engage to nothing—so it's of no use. If Ouaktehno were here now, it would be quite another thing. He and I should soon understand one another."

"Speak, then, he is listening to you," said a strong, sonorous voice.

There was a movement in the bushes, and the personage who, up to that moment, had remained an invisible spectator of the conversation of the two men, judged, without doubt, that the time to take a part in it was arrived, for, with a bound, he sprang out of the bushes that had concealed him, and placed himself between the interlocutors.

"Oh! oh! you were listening to us, Captain Ouaktehno, were you?" said the Babler, without being the least discomposed.

"Is that unpleasant to you?" said the new comer, with an ironical smile.

"Oh! not the least in the world."

"Continue, then, my brave friend—I am all ears."

"Well," said the guide, "it will, perhaps, be better so."

"Go on, then—speak; I attend to you."

The personage to whom the Babler gave the terrible Indian name of Ouaktehno—He-who-kills—was a man of the pure white race, thirty years of age, of lofty stature, and well proportioned, handsome in appearance, and wearing with a certain dashing carelessness the picturesque costume of the wanderers of the woods. His features were noble, strongly marked, and impressed with that loyal and haughty expression so often met with among men accustomed to the rude, free life of the prairies.

He fixed his large, black, brilliant eyes upon the Babler; a smile curled his lips, and he leant carelessly upon his carbine whilst listening to the guide.

"If I cause the people I am paid to escort and conduct to fall into your hands, you may depend upon it I will not do so unless I am amply recompensed," said the guide.

"That is but fair," said Kennedy, "and the captain is ready to assure your being recompensed."

"Yes," said the other, nodding his head in sign of agreement.

"Very well," resumed the guide. "But what shall be my recompense?"

"What do you ask?" said the captain. "We must know what your conditions are before we agree to satisfy them."

"Oh! my terms are very moderate."

"Well, but what are they?"

The guide hesitated, or, rather, he calculated mentally the chances of gain and loss the affair offered; then, in an instant, he replied:

"These Americans are very rich."

"Probably," said the captain.

"Therefore it appears to me—"

"Speak without waste of words, Babler; we have not time to listen to your circumlocutions. Like all half-bloods, the Indian nature always prevails in you, and you never come frankly to the purpose."

"Well, then," bluntly replied the guide; "I will have five thousand good dollars, or nothing shall be done."

"For once you speak out; now we know what we have to trust to; you demand five thousand dollars?"

"I do."

"And for that sum you take upon yourself to deliver up to us, the General, his niece, and all the individuals who accompany them."

"At your first signal."

"Very well! Now listen to what I am going to say to you. If you loyally fulfil the engagements you freely make with me: that is to say, deliver up to me, not all that comprise your caravan, very respectable people no doubt, but for whom I care very little, but only the young girl, called, I think, Kate Harwood, I will not give you five thousand dollars, as you ask, but eight thousand—you understand me, do you not?"

The eyes of the guide sparkled with greediness and cupidity.

"Yes!" said he, emphatically.

"That's well."

"But it will be difficult to draw her from the camp alone."

"That is nothing to me. Yes or no—do you accept the offer I make you?"

"Oh! I accept it."

"Do you swear to be faithful to your engagements?"

"I swear."

"Now then, how long does the General reckon upon remaining in this new encampment?"

"Ten days."

"Why, then, did you tell me that you did know how to draw the young girl out, having so much time before you?"

"Hum! I did not know when you would require her to be delivered up to you."

"That's true. Well, I give you nine days; that is to say, on the eve of their departure the young girl shall be given up to me."

"It could not be better."

"Here, then, Babler," said the captain, giving the guide a magnificent diamond pin which he wore in his hunting-shirt, "here is my earnest."

"Oh!" exclaimed the half-breed, seizing the jewel joyfully.

"That pin," said the captain, "is a present in addition to the eight thousand dollars I will hand over to you on receiving Miss Harwood."

"You are noble and generous," said the guide; "it is a pleasure to serve you."

"Only," rejoined the captain, in a rough voice, and with a look cold as a steel blade, "I would have you remember I am *he who kills*, and that if you deceive me, there does not exist, in the prairie,

a place sufficiently strong, or sufficiently unknown, to protect you from the terrible effects of my vengeance."

"I know that, captain," said the guide, shuddering in spite of himself; "but you may be quite satisfied; I will not deceive you."

"I hope you will not! Now let us separate; your absence may be observed. In nine days I shall be here."

"In nine days I will place the girl in your hands."

The guide returned to the camp, which he entered without being seen.

As soon as they were alone, the two men with whom the Babbler had just made this hideous and strange bargain, retreated silently among the underwood, through which they crawled like serpents. They soon reached the banks of a little rivulet which ran, unperceived and unknown, through the forest. Kennedy whistled, in a certain fashion, twice. A slight noise was heard, and a horseman, holding two horses in hand, appeared at a few paces from the spot where they had stopped.

"Come on, Frank," said Kennedy, "you may advance without fear."

The horseman immediately advanced.

"What is there new?" asked Kennedy.

"Nothing very important," replied the horseman; "I have discovered an Indian track."

"Ah! ah!" said the captain, "numerous?"

"Rather so."

"In what direction?"

"It cuts the prairie from east to west."

"Well done, Frank; and what are these Indians?"

"As well as I can make out, they are Comanches."

The captain reflected a moment.

"Oh! it is some detachment of hunters," said he.

"Very likely," replied Frank.

The two men mounted.

"Frank and you, Kennedy," said the captain, "go to the passage of the Buffalo, and encamp yourselves in the grotto which is there; carefully watch the movements of the travelers, but in such a manner as not to be discovered."

"Be satisfied of that, captain."

"You are adroit and devoted comrades, therefore I perfectly rely upon you. Watch the Babbler likewise; that fellow only inspires me with moderate confidence."

"That shall all be done."

"Farewell, then, till we meet again. You shall soon hear of me."

Notwithstanding the darkness, the three men set off at a gallop, and were soon far in the desert, in two different directions.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEE HUNT.

THE General had kept the causes which made him undertake a journey into the prairies from the west of the United States so profound a secret, that the persons who accompanied him had not even a suspicion of them.

Several times already, at his command, and without any apparent reason, the caravan encamped in regions completely desert, where he had passed a week, and sometimes a fortnight, without any thing seeming to have been a motive for that halt.

In these various encampments, the General would set out every morning, attended by one of the guides, and not return till evening.

What was he doing during the long hours of his absence? For what were these explorations made, at the end of which a greater degree of sadness darkened his countenance?

No one knew.

During these excursions, Miss Harwood led a sufficiently monotonous life, isolated among the rude people who surrounded her. She passed whole days seated sadly in front of her tent, or, mounted on horseback, and escorted by Captain Aguilar or the fat doctor, she took rides near the camp without object and without interest.

It happened this time again, exactly as it had happened at the preceding stations of the caravan. The young girl, abandoned by her uncle, and even by the doctor, who was pursuing, with increasing ardor, the research for his imaginary plant, and set out resolutely every morning herbalizing, was reduced to the company of Captain Aguilar.

But Captain Aguilar was, as we are forced to admit, although young, elegant, and endowed with a certain relative intelligence, not a very amusing companion for Kate. A brave soldier, with the courage of a lion, entirely devoted to the General, to whom he owed every thing, the captain entertained for the niece of his chief great

attachment and respect; he watched with the utmost care over her safety, but he was completely unacquainted with the means of rendering the time shorter by those attentions and that pleasant chat which are so agreeable to young girls.

This time Kate did not become so *ennuyée* as usual. Since that terrible night—from the time that one of those fabulous heroes of whom she had so often read the history, and the high, incredible feats, Loyal Heart, had appeared to her to save her and those who accompanied her—a new sentiment, and which she had not even thought of analyzing, had germinated in her young girl's heart, had grown by degrees, and in but a very few days had taken possession of her whole being.

The brusque manner in which the hunter had left them, disdaining the most simple thanks, and appearing even unconcerned for those he had saved, had chilled the young girl; she was piqued, more than can be imagined, by that real or affected indifference. And, therefore, was she always seeking in her mind means to make her preserver repent of that indifference, if chance should a second time bring them together.

It is well known, although it may at the first glance appear a paradox, that from hatred, or, at least, from curiosity, to love, there is but one step.

Kate passed it at full speed, without perceiving it.

She longed to see the hunter and talk with him. Why? She did not herself know. To see him—to hear his voice—to meet his look at once so soft and so proud—nothing else; all young girls would have done the same.

But how was she to see him again?

In reply to that question arose an impossibility, before which the poor girl drooped her head with discouragement. And yet something at the bottom of her heart, perhaps that voice divine which in the reflections of love whispers to young girls, told her that her wish would soon be accomplished.

She hoped, then?

What for?

For some unforeseen incident—a terrible danger, perhaps—which might again bring them together. True love may doubt sometimes, but it never despairs.

It was four days after the establishment of the camp upon the hill. The sun was scarcely above the horizon when the General, whose horse was already saddled, left the reed cabin which served him as a sleeping-apartment, and prepared to set out on his usual daily ride.

A quarter of an hour later, Kate and her uncle, preceded by the Babbler, and followed by two soldiers, quitted the camp and plunged into the forest.

"Which way would you wish to direct your course to-day, General?" asked the guide.

"Conduct me to the huts of those trappers you spoke of yesterday."

The guide bowed in sign of obedience. The little troop advanced slowly and with some difficulty along a scarcely traced path, where, at every step, the horses got entangled in the creeping plants, or stumbled over the roots of trees above the level of the ground.

Kate was gay and happy. Perhaps in these excursions she might meet with Loyal Heart.

The Babbler who was a few paces in advance, suddenly uttered a cry.

"Eh!" said the General, "what extraordinary thing has happened, Master Babbler, to induce you to speak?"

"The bees, general."

"What! bees! are the bees here?"

"Yes; but lately only."

"How only lately?"

"Why, you know, of course, bees were brought into America by the whites."

"That I know. How is it, then, they are met with here?"

"Nothing more simple; the bees are the advanced sentinels of the whites. In proportion as the whites penetrate into the interior of America, the bees go forward to trace the route for them, and point out the clearings. Their appearance in an uninhabited country always presages the arrival of a colony of pioneers or squatters."

"That is something strange," murmured the General; "are you sure of what you are telling me?"

"Oh! quite sure; the fact is well known to all Indians; they are not mistaken in it, be assured; for as soon as they see the bees arrive, they retreat."

The guide, who some moments before, had placed a bait for the bees upon the bushes, to which, with his piercing sight, he had already seen several bees attracted, made a sign to those behind him to stop.

The bees had, in fact, lighted upon the bait, and were examining it all over; when they had made their provision, they rose very high up into the air, and then took to flight in a direct line with the velocity of a cannon-ball.

The guide carefully watched the direction they took, and making a sign to the General, he sprung after them, followed by the whole troop, clearing themselves a way through interlaced roots, fallen trees, bushes and briars, their eyes directed all the while towards heaven.

In this fashion they never lost sight of the laden bees, and after a difficult pursuit of an hour, they saw them arrive at their nest, constructed in the hollow of a dead ebony-tree; after buzzing for a moment, they entered into a hole situated at more than eighty feet from the ground.

Then the guide, after having warned his companions to keep at a respectful distance, in order to be out of the way of the falling tree and the vengeance of its inhabitants, seized his ax and attacked the tree vigorously near the base.

The bees did not seem at all alarmed by the strokes of the ax; they continued going in and out, carrying on their industrial labors in full security. A violent cracking even, which announced the splitting of the trunk, did not divert them from their occupations.

At length the tree fell with a horrible crash, opening the whole of its length, and leaving displayed the accumulated treasures of the community.

The guide immediately seized a bundle of hay which he had prepared, and to which he set fire to defend himself from the bees.

But they attacked nobody; they did not seek to avenge themselves. The poor creatures were stupefied; they ran and flew about in all directions round their destroyed empire, without thinking of any thing but how to account for this unlooked-for catastrophe.

Then the guide and the soldiers set to work with spoons and knives to get out the comb and put it into the wine-skins.

Some of the comb was of a deep brown, and of ancient date, other parts were of a beautiful white; the honey in the cells was almost limpid.

Whilst they were hastening to get possession of the best combs, they saw arrive on the wing from all parts of the horizon numberless swarms of honey-bees, who, plunging into the broken cells, loaded themselves, whilst the ex-proprietors of the hive, dull and stupefied, looked on, without seeking to save the least morsel of the plunder of their honey.

It is impossible to describe the astonishment of those bees who were absent at the moment of the catastrophe, as they arrived at their late home with their cargoes; they described circles in the air round the place the tree had occupied, astonished to find it empty; at length, however, they seemed to comprehend their disaster, and collected in groups upon the dried branch of a neighboring tree, appearing to contemplate from thence the fallen ruin, and to lament the destruction of their empire.

Kate felt affected, in spite of herself, at the trouble of these poor creatures.

"Let us go," said she; "I repent of having wished for honey; my greediness has made too many unhappy."

"Let us be gone," said the General, smiling; "leave them these few combs."

"Oh!" said the guide, shrugging his shoulders, "they will soon be carried away by the vermin."

"The vermin! What vermin do you mean?" asked the General.

"Oh! the raccoons, the opossums, but particularly the bears."

"The bears?" said Kate.

"Oh, Miss!" replied the guide, "they are the cleverest vermin in the world in discovering a tree of bees, and getting their share of the honey."

"Do they like honey, then?" said the lady, with excited curiosity.

"Why, they are mad after it, Miss," rejoined the guide, who really seemed to relax of his cynical humor. "Imagine how greedy they are after it, when they will gnaw a tree for weeks, until they succeed in making a hole large enough to put their paws in, and then they carry off honey and bees, without taking the trouble to choose."

"Now," said the General, "let us resume our route, and seek the residence of the trappers."

They had gone but a short distance when the guide, suddenly coming up to them, made a sign to command silence, by saying, in a voice as low as a breath,

"A man!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLACK ELK.

EVERY one stopped.

In the desert this word man almost always means an enemy. Man, in the prairies, is more dreaded by his fellow than the most ferocious wild beast. A man is a rival, a forced associate, who, by the right

of the most strong, comes to share with the first occupant, and often, if we may not say always, to seek to deprive him of the fruits of his thankless labor.

Thus, whites, Indians, or half-breeds, when they meet in the prairies, salute each other with an eye on the watch, ears open, and finger on the trigger of the rifle.

At this cry of a man, the General and the soldiers, at all hazards, prepared against a sudden attack by cocking their guns, and concealing themselves as much as possible behind the bushes.

At fifty paces before them stood an individual, who, the butt on the ground, and his two hands leaning on the barrel of a long rifle, was observing them attentively.

It was a man of lofty stature, with energetic features and a frank, determined look. His long hair, arranged with care, was tressed, mingled with otter skins and ribbons of various colors. A hunting-blouse of ornamented leather fell to his knees; gaiters of a singular cut, ornamented with strings, fringes, and a profusion of little bells, covered his legs; his *chaussure* consisted of a pair of superb moccasins, embroidered with false pearls. A scarlet blanket hung from his shoulders, and was fastened round his middle by a red belt, through which were passed two pistols, a knife and an Indian pipe. His rifle was profusely decorated with vermillion and little copper nails.

At a few paces from him his horse was browsing on the mast of the trees.

Like its master it was equipped in the most fantastic manner, spotted and striped with vermillion, the reins and crupper ornamented with false pearls and bunches of ribbon, its head, mane and tail abundantly decorated with eagle's feathers floating in the wind.

At sight of this personage the General could not restrain a cry of surprise.

"To what Indian tribe does this man belong?" demanded he of the guide.

"To none," replied the latter.

"How, to none?"

"No; he is a white trapper."

"And so dressed?"

The guide shrugged his shoulders.

"We are in the prairies," said he.

"That is true," murmured the General.

In the mean time, the individual we have described, tired, no doubt, of the hesitation of the little troop before him, and wishing to know how they could concern him, resolutely accosted them.

"Eh! eh!" said he in English; "who are you, and what are you seeking here?"

The General, throwing his gun behind him, and ordering his people to do the same said,

"We are travelers, fatigued with a long journey; the sun is hot, and we ask permission to rest a short time in your hut."

"Approach without fear; the Black Elk is a good sort of devil when people do not seek to thwart him; you shall share the little he possesses, and much good may it do you."

At the name of the Black Elk the guide could not repress a movement of terror; he wished even to say a few words, but he had not time, for the hunter, throwing his gun upon his shoulder, and leaping into his saddle with a bound, advanced toward the strangers.

"My rancho is a few paces from this," said he to the General; "if the lady is inclined to taste the well-seasoned hump of a buffalo, I am in a position to offer her that piece of politeness."

"I thank you," replied the young girl, smiling; "but I confess that at this moment I stand in more need of repose than any thing else."

"Every thing will come in its time," said the trapper, sententiously. "Permit me, for a few moments, to take the place of your guide."

"We are at your orders," said the General; "go on, we will follow you."

"Forward, then," said the trapper, placing himself at the head of the little troop,

At this moment his eyes fell by chance upon the guide; his thick eyebrows contracted. "Hum!" muttered he to himself, "what does that mean? We shall see," added he.

And without taking further notice of the man, without appearing to recognize him, he gave the signal for departure.

After having ridden for some time silently along the banks of a moderately wide rivulet, the trapper made a sharp turn, and departing from the stream suddenly plunged into the forest,

"I crave your pardon," said he, "for making you turn out of your way; but this is a beaver pond, and I do not wish to frighten them."

"Oh!" cried the young lady, "how delighted I should be to see those industrious animals at work."

The trapper stopped.

"Nothing more easy, Miss," said he, "if you will follow me, while your companions remain here and wait for us."

"Yes, yes," replied Kate, eagerly; but, checking herself all at once, "oh, pardon me, dear uncle," said she.

The General cast a look at the trapper.

"Go, my child," said he, "we will wait for you here."

"Thank you, uncle," said the young girl, joyfully, jumping from her horse.

"I will be answerable for her," said the trapper, frankly; "fear nothing."

"I fear nothing when trusting her to your care, my friend," replied the General.

"Thanks!" And making a sign to the young lady, the Black Elk disappeared with her among the bushes and trees.

When they had arrived at some distance, the trapper stopped. After having listened and looked around him on all sides, he stooped toward the young girl, and laying his hand lightly on her right arm,

"Listen!" said he.

Miss Harwood stood still, uneasy and trembling. The trapper perceived her agitation.

"Be not afraid," rejoined he; "I am an honest man; you are in as much safety alone with me in this desert as if you were in the Cathedral of Mexico, at the foot of the high altar."

The young girl cast a furtive glance at the trapper. In spite of his singular costume, his face wore such an expression of frankness, his eye was so soft and limpid, when fixed upon her, that she felt completely reassured.

"Speak," said she.

"You belong," resumed the trapper, "I perceive now, to that troop of strangers who, for some days past, have been exploring the prairies in every direction. Do you not?"

"Yes."

"Among you is a sort of madman, who wears blue spectacles and a white wig, and who amuses himself—for what purpose I can not tell—with making a provision of herbs and stones, instead of trying, like a brave hunter, to trap a beaver or knock down a deer."

"I know the man you speak of; he, as you suppose, forms part of our troop; he is a very learned physician."

"I know he is; he told me so himself. He often comes this way. We are very good friends. By means of a powder which he persuaded me to take, he completely checked a fever which had tormented me two months, and of which I could not get rid."

"Indeed! I am happy to hear of such a result."

"I should like to do something for you to show my gratitude for that service."

"I thank you, my friend, but I can not see any thing in which you can be useful to me, unless it be in showing me the beavers."

The trapper shook his head.

"Perhaps in something else," said he, "and that much sooner than you fancy. Listen to me attentively. I am but a poor man; but here in the prairie, we know many things that God reveals to us, because we live face to face with Him. I will give you a piece of good advice. The man who serves you as a guide is an arrant scoundrel, and is known as such throughout the West. I am very much deceived if he does not lead you into some ambush. There are not wanting here plenty of rogues with whom he may lay plans to destroy you, or at least, rob you."

"Are you sure of what you say?" cried the young girl, terrified at words which coincided so strangely with what Loyal Heart had said to her.

"I am as sure as a man can be who affirms a thing of which he has no proof; that is to say, after the antecedents of the Babbler every thing of the sort must be expected from him. Believe me, if he has not already betrayed you, it will not be long before he will."

"Good God! I will go and warn my uncle."

"Beware of doing that! that would ruin all! The people with whom your guide will soon be in collusion, if he be not so already, are numerous, determined, and thoroughly acquainted with the prairie."

"What is to be done, then?" asked the young girl, with great alarm.

"Nothing. Wait; and, without appearing to do so, carefully watch all your guide's proceedings."

"But—"

"You must be sure," interrupted the trapper, "that if I lead you to mistrust him, it is not with a view of deserting you when the moment comes for requiring my help."

"Oh! I believe that."

"Well, then, this is what you must do: as soon as you shall be certain that your guide has betrayed you, send your old mad doctor to me—you can trust him, can you not?"

"Entirely."

"Very well. Then, as I have said, you must send him to me,

charging him only to say this to me: 'Black Elk'—I am Black Elk—"

"I know you are; you told us so."

"That is right. He will say to me, '*Black Elk, the hour is come,*' and nothing else. Shall you remember these words?"

"Perfectly. Only, I do not clearly understand how that can serve us."

The trapper smiled in a mysterious manner.

"Hum!" said he, after a short pause, "these few words will bring to you, in two hours, fifty men, the bravest in the prairies—men who, at a signal from their leader, would allow themselves to be killed rather than leave you in the hands of those who will have possession of you, if what I expect should happen."

There was a moment of silence—Kate appeared very thoughtful. The trapper smiled.

"Do not be surprised at the warm interest I take in you," said he; "a man who has entire power over me, has made me swear to watch over you, during an absence he has been compelled to make."

"What do you mean by that?" said she, with awakened curiosity. "And who is that man?"

"That man is a hunter who commands all the white trappers of the prairies. Knowing that you had the Babbler for a guide, he suspects that the fellow intends to draw you into some snare."

"But the name of that man?" cried she, in an anxious, excited tone.

"Loyal Heart. Will you have confidence in me now?"

"Thanks, my friend, thanks!" replied the young girl, with great emotion. "I will not forget your instructions; and when the moment comes—if unfortunately it should come—I will not hesitate to remind you of your promise."

"And you will do well, Miss, because it will then be the only means of safety that will be left you. You understand me perfectly, and all is well. Be sure and keep our conversation to yourself. Above all, do not appear to have any secret understanding with me; that devil of a guide is as cunning as a beaver; if he suspect any thing, he will slip through your fingers, like a serpent as he is."

"Be satisfied; I will be mute."

"Now let us pursue our way to the beaver pond. Loyal Heart watches over you."

"He has already saved our lives on the occasion of the conflagration of the prairies," said she, with emotion.

"Ah, ha!" murmured the trapper, fixing his eyes upon her with a singular expression, "every thing is for the best, then." And he added, in a loud voice: "Be without fear; if you follow strictly the advice I have given you, no evil will happen to you in the prairies, whatever be the treachery to which you may be exposed."

"Oh!" cried the girl, with great warmth; "in the hour of danger I will not hesitate to have recourse to you—I swear I will not!"

"That is settled," said Black Elk, smiling; "now let us go and see the beavers."

CHAPTER X.

THE PIRATES.

It was evening, at a distance nearly equal from the camp of the Americans and that of the Comanches.

Concealed in a ravine, deeply inclosed between two hills, about forty men were assembled around several fires, dispersed in such a manner that the light of the flames could not betray their presence.

These men, a heterogeneous mixture of all the nationalities that people the two worlds, from Russia to China, were the most complete collection of scoundrels that can be imagined; men of the sack and the cord, without faith or law, fire or home, the true outcasts of society, which had rejected them from its bosom, obliged to seek a refuge in the depths of the prairies of the West; in these deserts even they formed a band apart, fighting sometimes against the hunters, sometimes against the Indians, exceeding both in cruelty and roguery.

These men were, in a word, what it is agreed to call them, the *pirates of the prairies*. A denomination which suits them in every way, since, like their brothers of the ocean, hoisting all colors, or rather trampling them all under foot, they fall upon every traveler who ventures to cross the prairies alone, attack and plunder caravans, and when all other prey escapes them, they hide themselves traitorously in the high grass to entrap the Indians.

This troop was commanded by Captain Ouaktehno, whom we have already had occasion to bring on the scene.

There prevailed at this moment among these bandits an agitation that presaged some mysterious expedition.

Some were cleaning and loading their arms, others mending their

clothes; some were smoking and drinking mezcal, others were asleep, folded in their ragged cloaks.

The horses, all saddled ready for mounting, were fastened to pickets.

At stated distances, sentinels, leaning on their long carbines, silent and motionless as statues of bronze, watched over the safety of all.

The dying flashes of the fires, which were going out by degrees, threw a reddish reflection upon the picture that gave the pirates a still fiercer aspect.

The captain appeared a prey to extreme anxiety; he walked with long strides among his subordinates, stamping his foot with anger, and stopping at intervals to listen to the noises of the prairies.

The night became darker and darker, the moon had disappeared, the wind moaned among the mornes (small hillocks), the pirates had ended by, one after another, giving themselves up to sleep.

The captain alone still watched.

Bandits don't sleep late. At sunrise all were on the alert in the camp of the pirates; every one was preparing for departure.

As soon as he was certain the orders he had issued were understood, the captain gave the signal for departure. The troop set off in the Indian fashion—that is to say, literally turning their backs toward the point to which they directed their course. When arrived in a position that appeared to present to them the security they desired, the pirates dismounted; the horses were confided to a few determined men, and the rest, crawling along upon the ground like a swarm of vipers, or jumping from branch to branch, and from tree to tree, advanced, with all the customary precautions, toward the camp of General Harwood.

In the mean time, things in the camp were not in their usual quiet state. Miss Harwood, placed on the alert by the advice of Black Elk, had watched the Babbler so closely as to follow him, at night, out upon the prairie, and listen to a conversation between him and Kennedy, which disclosed to her the full peril which awaited her. She had immediately warned her uncle, who sent for the guide to compel a confession, when he found that the rascal had already decamped and gone over to the enemy.

Early the next morning the doctor had left the camp, charged by the young lady with a message to their trapper friend: "Black Elk, the hour has come!"

Like all learned men in us, the doctor was absent by nature, and that with the best intentions in the world.

During the first moments, according to the custom of his brethren, he puzzled his brain to endeavor to make out the signification of the words, somewhat cabalistical in his opinion, that he was to repeat to the trapper.

He could not comprehend of what assistance to his friends could be a half-wild man, who lived alone in the prairie, and whose existence was passed in hunting and trapping.

In the persuasion, therefore, that the mission with which he was charged was a useless one, instead of going full speed, as he ought to have done, to the hut of Black Elk, he dismounted, passed his arm through his bridle, and began to look for simples, an occupation which was not long in so completely absorbing him, that he entirely forgot the instructions of Kate, and the reason why he had left the camp.

In the mean while, time passed slowly because anxiously; half the day was gone, and the doctor, who ought long before to have returned, did not appear.

The uneasiness became great in camp, where the General and the captain had organized every thing for a vigorous defense, in case of attack.

But nothing appeared. The greatest calm continued to prevail in the environs; the travelers were not far from thinking it a false alarm.

Kate alone felt her inquietude increase every instant; with her eyes fixed upon the plain, she looked in vain in the direction her expected messengers should arrive by.

All at once it struck her that the high grass of the prairie had an oscillating motion which was not natural to it.

There was not a breath in the air; a heavy, stifling heat weighed down all nature; the leaves of the trees, scorched by the sun, were motionless; the high grass alone, agitated by a slow and mysterious movement, continued to oscillate upon itself. And, what was most extraordinary, this almost imperceptible motion, which required close attention to be observed, was not general; on the contrary, it was successive, approaching the camp by degrees, with a regularity which gave reason for supposing an organized impulsion; so that, in proportion as it was communicated to the nearest grass, the most distant returned into complete immobility, from which state it did not change.

The sentinels placed in the intrenchments could not tell to what to attribute this movement, of which they understood nothing.

The General, as an experienced soldier, resolved to know what it meant; although he had never personally had to do with Indians, he had heard too much of their manner of fighting not to suspect some stratagem.

Not wishing to weaken the camp, which stood in need of all its defenders, he resolved himself to undertake the adventure, and go out on the scout.

At the instant he was about to climb over the intrenchments, Captain Aguilar stopped him, by placing his hand respectfully on his shoulder.

"What do you want with me, my friend?" asked the General, turning round.

"I wish, with your permission, to put a few questions to you, General."

"Do so."

"You are leaving the camp?"

"I am."

"To go in search of intelligence, no doubt?"

"I admit that is my intention."

"Then, General, it is to me that mission belongs."

"Ay! how is that?" said the astonished General.

"General, that is very plain; I am but a poor devil of an officer, and owe every thing to you."

"What then?"

"The peril I shall run, if peril there be, will not in any way compromise the success of the expedition; whereas—"

"Whereas?"

"If you are killed—"

The General started.

"Every thing must be foreseen and provided for," continued the captain, "when we have before us such adversaries as those that threaten us."

"That is true. What then?"

"Well, the expedition will fail, and not one of us will ever see a civilized country again. You are the head; we are but the arms; remain, therefore, in the camp."

The General reflected for a few seconds; then, pressing the hand of the young man cordially,

"Thank you," said he; "but I must see for myself what is being contrived against us. The circumstance is too serious to allow me to trust even to you."

"You must remain in the camp, General," persisted the captain, "if not for our sake, at least for that of your niece, that innocent and delicate creature who, if any misfortune should happen to you, would find herself alone, abandoned amidst ferocious races, without support and without a protector. Of what consequence is my life to me, a poor lad without a family, who owes every thing to your kindness? The hour has come to prove my gratitude—let me discharge my debt."

"But—" the General tried to speak.

"You know," continued the young man, with warmth, "if I could take your place with your niece, I would do it with joy; but I am, as yet, too young to play that noble part. Come, General, let me go instead of you, it is my duty."

Half by persuasion, half by force, he succeeded in drawing the old soldier back; he sprung upon the intrenchments, leaped down on the other side, and set off at full speed, after making a last sign of adieu.

The General followed him with his eyes as long as he could perceive him; then he passed his hand across his careful brow, murmuring,

"Brave boy! excellent nature!"

"Is he not, uncle?" replied Kate, who had approached and listened without being seen.

"Ah! were you there, dear child?" said he, with a smile he endeavored in vain to render cheerful.

"Yes, dear uncle; I have heard all."

"That is well, dear little one," said the General, with an effort; "but this is not the time to give way to feeling; I must think of your safety. Do not remain here longer; come with me; an Indian ball might easily reach you here."

Taking her by the hand, he led her affectionately to the tent.

After taking her in, he gave her a kiss upon her brow, advised her not to go out again, and returned to the intrenchments, where he set himself to watch with the greatest care what was going on in the plain; calculating the while, mentally, the time that had passed away since the departure of the doctor, and feeling astonished at not seeing him return.

"He must have fallen in with the Indians," said he, "if they have not killed him."

Captain Aguilar was an intrepid soldier, who knew how to unite prudence with courage.

When arrived at a certain distance from the camp, he laid himself on the ground, face downward, and reached, by creeping along thus, a rough piece of rock, admirably situated for concealment and observation.

Every thing appeared quiet around him; nothing denoted the approach of an enemy. After spending a sufficient time in keenly exploring with his eyes the country beyond him, he was preparing to return to the camp, with a conviction that the General was deceived,

and no eminent peril existed, when suddenly, within ten paces of him, an *asshata* bounded up in great terror, with ears erect and head thrown back, and fled away with extreme velocity.

"Oh, oh!" said the young man to himself, "there is something here, though. Let us try if we can not make out what."

Quitting the rock behind which he had been screened, he, with great precaution, advanced a few steps, in order to satisfy his suspicions.

The grass became powerfully agitated, half a score men arose suddenly from various points, and surrounded him before he had time to put himself on the defensive, or regain the shelter he had imprudently quitted.

"Well," said he, with disdainful coolness, "luckily, I know now that I have something to do."

"Surrender!" cried one of the men nearest to him.

"No, thank you," replied he, with an ironical smile. "You are fools if you expect that. You must kill me out and out before you take me."

"Then we will kill you, my dainty spark," replied the first speaker, brutally.

"I reckon upon that," said the captain, in a jeering tone; "but I mean to defend myself; that will make a noise, my friends will hear us, your surprise will be a failure, and that is exactly what I wish."

These words were pronounced with a coolness that made the pirates pause. These men belonged to the troop of Captain Ouaktehno, who himself was among them.

"Yes," retorted the captain of the band, "your idea is not a bad one, only you forgot that we can kill you without making a noise; and so your clever plan will come to nothing."

"Bah! who knows?" said the young man, and before the pirates could prevent him, he made an extraordinary spring backwards, by which he overset two men, and ran with his best speed in the direction of the camp.

The first surprise over, the bandits darted forward in pursuit of him.

This trial of speed lasted a considerable time without the pirates being able to perceive that they gained ground on the fugitive. Though not relaxing in the pursuit, as they tried as much as possible to avoid being seen by the American sentinels, whom they hoped to surprise, they were obliged to make turnings which necessarily impeded their course.

The captain had arrived within hearing of his friends, and he cast a glance behind him. Profiting by a moment in which he had paused to take breath, the bandits had gained upon him considerably, and the young man became aware that if he continued to fly, he should cause the misfortune he wished to avoid. His determination was formed in an instant; he was satisfied he must die, but he wished to die as a soldier, and make his fall useful to those for whom he devoted himself.

He placed his back against a tree, laid his knife within reach, drew his pistols from his belt, and facing the bandits, who were not more than thirty paces from him, in order to attract the attention of his friends, he cried in a loud voice:

"To arms! to arms! be on your guard! The enemies are here!"

Then, with the greatest coolness, he discharged his weapons as if at a target—he had four double pistols—repeating as every pirate fell, as loud as he could shout,

"To arms! the enemies are here! they will surround you! Be on your guard!"

The bandits, exasperated by this brave defense, rushed upon him with great rage, forgetting all the precautions they had till that time taken.

Then commenced a horrible but almost superhuman struggle of one man against twenty or thirty; for it seemed as every pirate fell, that another took his place.

The conflict was fearful! The young man had determined to make a sacrifice of his life, but he was equally resolved to sell it dearly.

We have said that at every shot he fired he had uttered a warning cry; his pistols being discharged, at every strike of his sword that he made he did the same, to which his friends replied by keeping up, on their part, a rolling fire of musketry upon the pirates, who showed themselves openly, blindly bent upon the destruction of a man who so audaciously barred their passage with the impenetrable barrier of his loyal breast.

At length the captain was brought down on one knee. The pirates rushed upon him pell mell, wounding each other in their frantic efforts to destroy him.

Such a combat could not last long. Captain Aguilar fell, but in falling he drew with him a dozen pirates he had immolated, and who formed a bloody escort on his passage to the tomb.

"Hum!" muttered Ouaktehno, surveying him with admiration, whilst stanching the blood of a large wound he had received in the breast; "a roughish sort of a fellow! If the others are like him,

we shall have more than our work to do. Come!" continued he, turning towards his companions, who awaited his orders, "do not let us stand here any longer to be shot at like pigeons. To the assault! to the assault!"

The pirates rushed after him, brandishing their arms, and began to climb the rock, vociferating, "To the assault! to the assault!"

On their side, his friends, witnesses of the heroic death of Captain Aguilar, prepared to avenge him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST ASSAULT.

THE soldiers posted behind the intrenchments had received the pirates warmly.

The General, exasperated by the death of Captain Aguilar, and perceiving that with such enemies there was no quarter to be expected, had resolved to stand out to the last, and to kill himself rather than fall into their hands.

The Americans, reckoning the peons and guides, in whom they scarcely dared to trust, amounted to only seventeen, men and women included. The pirates were at least thirty.

The numerical disproportion was then great between the besiegers and the besieged; but, thanks to the strong position of the camp, seated on the summit of a chaos of rocks, this disproportion in part disappeared, and the forces were nearly equal.

Captain Ouaktehno had not for an instant deceived himself with regard to the difficulties of the attack he meditated—difficulties almost insurmountable in an open assault; therefore he had depended upon a surprise, and more particularly upon the treachery of the Babbler. It was only from having been carried away by circumstances, and being furious at the loss Captain Aguilar had caused him, that he had ventured upon an assault.

But the first moment of effervescence over, when he saw his men falling around him like ripe fruit, unrevenged, and without gaining an inch of ground, he resolved not to retreat, but to change the siege into a blockade, hoping to be more fortunate during the night by some bold *coup de main*, or, despairing of his cause, certain of reducing the besieged sooner or later by famine.

He believed himself certain that they would find it impossible to obtain succor in the prairies, where there were none but Indians, hostile to the whites, whoever they might be, or trappers and hunters, who cared very little to intermeddle in affairs that did not at all concern them.

His resolution once taken, the captain put it in execution immediately.

He cast an anxious look around him; his situation was still the same; notwithstanding their almost superhuman efforts to climb the abrupt ascent which led to the entrenchments, the pirates had not gained a single step. The moment a man showed himself openly, a ball from a carbine sent him rolling down the precipice.

The captain gave the signal for retreat; that is to say, he imitated the cry of the dog of the prairies. The combat ceased instantly. The spot, which an instant before was animated by the cries of combatants and the continued report of fire-arms, sunk suddenly into the completest silence.

Only, as soon as the men paused in their work of destruction, the condors, the vultures, and urubus commenced theirs. After pirates, birds of prey; that is according to the order of things.

Clouds of condor, vultures, and urubus came hovering over the dead bodies, upon which they fell, uttering sharp cries, and made a horrible carnage of human flesh, in the sight of the Americans, who did not dare to leave their entrenchments, and were forced to remain spectators of this hideous banquet of the wild creatures.

The pirates rallied in a ravine, out of reach of the fire, and counted their numbers. Their losses were enormous; out of forty, nineteen only remained. In less than an hour they had twenty-one killed, more than half of their whole troop.

The Americans, with the exception of Captain Aguilar, had neither killed nor wounded.

The loss the pirates had sustained made them reflect seriously upon the affair. The greater number were of opinion it would be best to retire, and give up an expedition which presented so many dangers and so few hopes of success.

The captain was more discouraged than his companions. Certes, if it had only been to gain gold or diamonds, he would, without hesitation, have resigned his projects; but a feeling more strong than the desire of wealth influenced his actions, and excited him to carry the adventure through, whatever might be the consequences to him. The treasure he coveted—a treasure of incalculable price—was Kate, the girl whom he had seen in the streets of New Orleans, and

for whom he entertained a violent, boundless, characteristic passion.

From New Orleans he had followed her, step by step, watching, like a wild beast, for an opportunity of carrying off his prey—for the possession of which no sacrifice was too great, no difficulty insuperable, and no danger worthy of consideration.

Therefore did he bring into play upon his bandits all the resources that speech gives to a man influenced by passion, to keep them with him, to raise their courage, and to induce them to attempt one more attack before retiring and definitively renouncing the expedition.

He had much trouble in persuading them; as generally happens in such cases, the bravest had been killed, and the survivors did not feel themselves at all inclined to expose themselves to a similar fate. By dint, however, of persuasions and menaces the captain succeeded in getting from the bandits the promise of remaining till the next day, and of attempting a decisive blow during the night.

This being agreed upon between the pirates and their chief, Ouak-tehno ordered his men to conceal themselves as well as they could, but, above all, not to stir without his orders, whatever they might see the besieged do.

The captain hoped by remaining invisible to persuade them that, discouraged by the enormous difficulties they had met with, the pirates had resolved to retreat, and had in fact done so.

This plan was not at all unskillful, and it, in fact, produced almost all the results its author expected.

The glowing fires of the setting sun gilded with their last rays the summits of the rocks and the trees; the breeze of evening, which was rising, refreshed the air; the great luminary was about to disappear in the horizon, in a bed of purple vapors.

Silence was only disturbed by the deafening cries of the birds of prey, who continued their cannibal banquet, quarreling with ferocious inveteracy over the fragments of flesh which they tore from the dead carcases.

The General, with a heart deeply moved by this spectacle, when he reflected that Captain Aguilar, a man whose heroic devotion had saved them all, was exposed to this horrible profanation, resolved not to abandon his body, and, cost what it might, to go and bring it in, in order to give it sepulture—a last homage due to the young man who had not hesitated to sacrifice himself for them.

Kate, to whom he communicated his intention, although perfectly sensible of the danger, had not the heart to oppose it.

The General selected four resolute men, and scaling the entrenchments, he advanced at their head towards the spot where the body of the unfortunate captain lay.

The soldiers left in the camp kept a watchful eye upon the plain, ready to protect their bold companions with energy, if they were interrupted in their pious task.

The pirates concealed in the clefts of the rocks did not lose one of their movements, but were most careful not to betray their presence.

The General was able, therefore, to accomplish unmolested the duty he had imposed upon himself. He had no difficulty in finding the body of the young man. He lay half prostrate at the foot of a tree, holding a pistol in one hand and his sword in the other, his head elevated, his look fixed, and a smile upon his lips, as if even after death he defied those who had killed him.

His body was literally covered with wounds; but, by a strange chance, which the General remarked with joy, up to that moment the birds of prey had respected him. The soldiers placed the body upon their crossed guns, and returned to the camp at quick march.

The General followed at a short distance from them, observing and watching every bush and thicket. But nothing stirred; the greatest tranquillity prevailed every where; the pirates had disappeared, without leaving any other traces but their dead, whom they appeared to have abandoned.

The General began to hope that his enemies were really gone, and he breathed a sigh, as if relieved from an oppression of the heart.

Night came on with its habitual rapidity; all eyes were fixed upon the soldiers who bore back their dead officer, but no one remarked a score of phantoms who glided silently over the rocks, drawing, by degrees, nearer to the camp, close to which they concealed themselves, keeping their ferocious looks fixed upon its defenders.

The General caused the body to be placed upon a bed prepared in haste, and taking a spade, he insisted upon himself digging the grave in which the young man was to be deposited. All the men ranged themselves around him, leaning on their arms.

The General took off his hat, and from a prayer-book read with a loud voice the service of the dead, to which his niece and all present responded.

There was something grand and impressive in this simple ceremony, in the midst of the desert, whose thousand mysterious voices appeared likewise to modulate a prayer, in face of that sublime Nature upon which the finger of God is traced in so visible a manner.

This white-headed old man, piously reading the office of the dead

over the body of a young man, little more than a boy, full of life but a few hours before, having around him that young girl and these sad, pensive soldiers, whom the same fate, perhaps, threatened soon to overtake, but who, calm and resigned, prayed with fervor for him who was no more; this noble prayer, rising in the night, accompanied by the moanings and the breezes of evening, which passed quivering through the branches of the trees, recalled the early times of Christianity, when, persecuted and forced to hide itself, it took refuge in the desert, to be nearer to God.

Nothing occurred to disturb the accomplishment of this last duty.

After every body present had once again taken a melancholy farewell of the dead, he was lowered into the grave, enveloped in his cloak; his arms were placed by his side, and the grave was filled up.

A slight elevation of the sod, which would soon disappear, alone marked the place where reposed for ever the body of a man whose unfamed heroism had saved by a sublime devotedness those who had confided to him their protection.

The mourners separated, swearing to avenge the dead, or that failing, to do as he had done.

Darkness was now spread over all.

The General, after having made a last round, to satisfy himself that the sentinels were steady at their posts, wished his niece a good night, and laid himself down across the entrance of her tent, on the outside.

Three hours passed away in perfect quiet.

All at once, like a legion of demons, a score of men scaled the intrenchments, and before the sentinels, surprised by this sudden attack, could attempt the least resistance, they were seized and slaughtered.

The camp of the Americans was invaded by the pirates; and in their train entered murder and pillage.

The pirates bounded into the camp like jackals, howling and waving their arms.

As soon as the camp was invaded, the captain left his people to pillage and kill at their pleasure. Without concerning himself any more about them he rushed toward the tent.

But there his passage was barred. The General had rallied seven or eight men round him, and awaited the bandit firmly, resolved to die rather than allow one of those wretches to touch his niece.

At the sight of the old soldier, with his flashing eye, his pistol in one hand and his sword in the other, the captain paused. But this pause did not last longer than a flash of lightning; he got together a half-score of pirates, and—

"Give way!" cried he, brandishing his weapons.

"Come on!" replied the General, biting his mustache with fury.

The two men rushed upon each other, their people imitated them, and the battle became general.

Then followed a terrible and merciless struggle between men who, on both sides, knew that they had no pity to expect. Every one endeavored to make his blows mortal, without taking the trouble to parry those dealt upon himself, satisfied with falling, provided that in his fall he could drag down his adversary. The wounded endeavored to rise for the purpose of burying their poniards in the bodies of those who were fighting round them.

This fierce contest could not last long; nearly all the soldiers were massacred; the General fell in his turn, struck down by the captain, who threw himself upon him and bound him tightly with his belt, in order to prevent the possibility of his resisting any further.

The General had received nothing but slight wounds which had scarcely penetrated to the flesh; for the captain, for reasons best known to himself, had carefully protected him during the combat, parrying with his knife the blows the bandits tried to inflict upon him.

He wished to take his enemy alive, and he had succeeded.

The Americans had fallen, it is true, but the victory had cost the pirates dear; more than half of them were killed.

The General's negro, armed with an enormous club, which he had made from the trunk of a young tree, for a long time resisted all who attempted to take him, crushing without mercy those who imprudently came within reach of the weapon he handled with such uncommon dexterity.

His enemies at length succeeded in lassoing him, and casting him half-strangled to the ground; the captain, however, came to his rescue, at the moment a pirate was raising his arm to put an end to him.

As soon as the captain found the General incapable of moving, he uttered a cry of joy, and without stopping to stanch the blood of two wounds which he had received, he bounded like a tiger over the body of his enemy, who was writhing powerless at his feet, and penetrated into the tent.

It was empty!

Miss Harwood had disappeared!

The captain was thunderstruck. What could have become of the young girl?

The tent was small, almost void of furniture—it was impossible she could be concealed in it. A disordered bed proved that at the moment of the surprise she had been sleeping peaceably.

She had vanished like a sylph, without leaving any trace of her flight. A flight perfectly incomprehensible to the pirate, as the camp had been invaded on all sides at once.

How was it possible for a young girl, awakened suddenly, to have had courage and presence of mind enough to fly so quickly, and pass unperceived amidst conquerors whose first care had been to guard all the issues?

The captain sought in vain the solution of this enigma. He stamped with anger, and plunged his poniard into the packages that might serve as temporary places of refuge for the fugitive; but all without success.

Convinced at length that all his researches in the tent were in vain, he rushed out, prowling about like a wild beast, persuaded that if by a miracle she had succeeded in escaping, alone in the night, half-dressed, wandering in the desert, he should easily find her again.

In the mean time, the pillage went on with a celerity and an order in its disorder, which did honor to the practiced knowledge of the pirates.

The conquerors, fatigued with killing and robbing, plunged their poniards into the skins filled with mizeal, and made orgies succeed to theft and murder.

All at once a loud and fierce cry resounded at a little distance, and a shower of balls came pattering full upon the bandits. Surprised in their turn, they flew to their arms, and endeavored to rally.

At the same instant, a mass of Indians appeared, bounding like jaguars among the packages, closely followed by a troop of hunters, at the head of whom were Loyal Heart, Belhumeur, Eagle's Head and Black Elk.

The position became critical for the pirates.

The captain, recalled to himself by the peril his people ran, left with regret the fruitless search he was engaged in, and grouping his men around him, he carried off the only two prisoners he had made, that is to say, the General and his black servant, and taking skillful advantage of the tumult inseparable from an interruption like that of the allies, he ordered his men to disperse in all directions, in order to escape more easily the blows of their adversaries.

After one sharp fire, which caused a slight pause among the Indians, the pirates flew away like a cloud of unclean birds of prey, and disappeared in the darkness. But, whilst flying, the captain, left last to support the retreat, did not cease, as he glided along the rocks, to seek still, as much as was possible in the precipitation of his flight, for traces of the young girl; but he could discover nothing.

The disappointed captain retired with rage in his heart, revolving in his head the most sinister projects.

But how did it chance that Loyal Heart should be so opportunely at the rescue?—and how, above all things, that his ancient deadly enemy, Eagle's Head, should now be his friend and ally? Briefly then: though compelled to go on one of those annual journeys of which we have previously spoken, Loyal Heart had never lost sight of the interests of that camp which he had reason to fear was threatened by the pirates. He had confided the care of it to Black Elk, who had promised to do all in his power to watch over and protect the young girl and her uncle.

Loyal Heart had a mother, whom he supported in comfort, and who lived on a little estate, not far from a settlement of whites which afforded her protection. Her husband had been killed by Indians, when her son was but six years of age, and she had been left alone to make her living and fight her way in a new, wild country; but since the arm of that son had waxed strong in manhood, he had never permitted want or danger to assail her. The day after the fire on the prairie, he heard, through his spies, that Eagle's Head sought vengeance for his escape, by a plan to invest his mother's estate in the night, burn the buildings, and murder her before her neighbors could come to the rescue.

It was this unexpected danger which called him away, earlier than he had expected, leaving him powerless to protect the camp of the Americans, except through his ally, Black Elk.

He reached his mother's plantation an hour in advance of Eagle's Head and his warriors, who, instead of surprising it, were themselves surprised and repulsed, but not until they had secured a partial revenge by setting fire to all the buildings. Loyal Heart and Eagle's Head had met in a personal contest, and again the former had disarmed his adversary, and after holding him entirely at his mercy had disdained to take the life of the savage.

"Twice," exclaimed Loyal Heart, "have I given you your life. Use it again, if you will, in the honorable attempt to kill my mother, a woman, since you can not kill me!"

Stung by this taunt, for a moment Eagle's Head writhed in silent

rage; then a change came over him; laying down what weapons were still left to him, he said,

"Hunter, you have conquered! Henceforth I will war no more against you; you are a brave man. Let me place myself and my warriors at your disposal."

Loyal Heart was the more pleased with this offer that he expected a combat with the pirates, and he accepted it as frankly as it was made. His mother being now homeless, he concluded to take her for the present to the grotto, where she would be safe and tolerably comfortable. She was placed on a horse, a few necessities were packed on the backs of other animals, and the whole party of hunters and Comanches set out for the cavern, where they knew they should meet Black Elk and learn if their services were needed to circumvent the pirates.

Loyal Heart, warned by the Indian scout, and more particularly by the recital of the doctor, of the proposed attack upon the camp, had marched immediately to bring succor to the Americans as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, in spite of the celerity of their march, the trappers and the Comanches arrived too late to save the caravan.

When the leaders of the expedition became assured of the flight of the pirates, Eagle's Head and his warriors set off on their track.

Left alone master of the camp, Loyal Heart ordered a general battue in the neighboring thickets and high grass which the bandits had not had time to explore in detail, for they had scarcely obtained possession of the camp before they were driven out of it again.

This battue brought to light Phoebe, the young servant of Miss Harwood, and two troopers, who had taken refuge in the trunk of a tree, and who arrived more dead than alive, conducted by Black Elk and some hunters, who tried in vain to reassure them, and revive their courage. The poor wretches still believed themselves to be in the hands of the pirates, and Loyal Heart had great difficulty in persuading them that the people they saw were friends who had come too late to succor them, but who would not do them any harm.

As soon as they were sufficiently restored to speak connectedly, Loyal Heart went with them into the tent, and required of them a succinct account of all that had taken place.

The young waiting-maid, when she saw with whom she had to do, all at once regained her wonted assurance; and besides, having recognized Loyal Heart she did not require much coaxing to set her tongue going, and a few minutes made the hunter acquainted with all the terrible events of which she had been a spectatress.

"So," asked he, "Captain Aguilar was killed, was he?"

"Alas! yes," replied the young girl, with a sigh of regret to the account of the poor young officer.

"And the General?" said the hunter.

"Oh! as to the General," said she, briskly, "he defended himself like a lion, and only fell after an heroic resistance."

"Is he dead then?" asked Loyal Heart, with strong emotion.

"Oh! no," said she, almost cheerfully, "he is only wounded. I saw the bandits pass as they carried him away; I even believe that his wounds are slight, so much did the pirates spare him during the combat."

"I am glad to hear it," said the hunter; and he hung his head with a pensive air; then, after a pause of an instant, he added, hesitatingly, and with a slight tremor in his voice, "your young mistress, what is become of her?"

"My mistress, Miss Harwood?"

"Yes, Miss Harwood, so I believe she is called; I would give much to know where she is, and to be certain she is in safety."

"She is so, since she is near you," said a harmonious voice.

And Kate appeared, still pale from the poignant emotions she had undergone, but calm; she had a smile on her lips, and her eyes sparkled brilliantly.

No one present could repress a movement of extreme surprise at the unexpected apparition of the young lady.

"God be praised!" cried the hunter; "our succor has not, then, been completely useless."

"No," replied she, kindly; but she shortly added with sadness, whilst a shade of melancholy clouded her features, "now that I have lost him who was to me as a father, I come to ask your protection."

"It is yours, madam," replied he, with warmth. "And as to your uncle, oh! depend upon me; I will restore him to you, if the enterprise costs me my life. You know," added he, "that it is not to-day only that I have proved my devotion to you and him."

The first emotion over, it became a question how the young girl had succeeded in escaping the researches of the pirates. Kate gave as simple an account as possible of what had passed.

She had thrown herself, with all her clothes on, upon the bed; but anxiety kept her awake, a secret presentiment warned her to be on her guard. At the cry uttered by the pirates, she started from her bed in terror and amazement, and at once perceived that all flight was impossible. While casting a terrified look around her, she perceived some clothes thrown in a disorderly manner into a hammock,

and hanging over the sides of it. An idea, which appeared to come to her from heaven, shot across her brain like a luminous flash. She glided under these clothes, and curling herself up into as little space as possible, she crouched at the bottom of the hammock, without altering the disordered state of the things. God had ordered it that the chief of the bandits, while searching, as he thought, every where, never dreamt of plunging his hand into what seemed an empty hammock.

Saved by this chance, she remained thus huddled up for full an hour, a prey to fears of the most appalling nature. The arrival of the hunters, together with the voice of Loyal Heart, which she soon recognized, restored her to hope; she left the place of concealment, and had impatiently waited for a favorable moment to present herself.

The hunters were wonderstruck at a recital at once so simple and so affecting; they cordially congratulated the young lady upon her courage and presence of mind, which alone had saved her.

When a little order was reestablished in the camp, Loyal Heart waited upon Miss Harwood.

"Young lady," said he, "it will not be long before day appears; when you have taken a few hours' repose, I will conduct you to my mother, who is a pious, good woman; when she knows you, I feel certain she will love you as a daughter. And then, as soon as you are in safety, I will set earnestly about restoring your uncle to you."

Without waiting for the thanks of the young girl, he bowed respectfully, and left the tent. When he had disappeared, Kate sighed, and sunk pensively down upon a seat.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAVERN OF VERDIGRIS.

TEN days had passed away since the events related in our last chapter. We will conduct the reader, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, into the grotto discovered by Belhumeur, of which Loyal Heart had made his chosen habitation.

The interior of the cavern, lighted by numerous torches of that wood which the Indians call candle-wood, and which burned fixed at distances on the projections of the rock, presented the aspect of a hall of gipsies, or of an encampment of bandits, whichever the stranger might fancy, who should chance to be admitted to visit it.

Forty trappers and Comanche warriors were dispersed about here and there; some were sleeping, others smoking, others cleaning their arms or repairing their clothes; a few, crouching before two or three fires, over which were suspended caldrons, and where enormous joints of venison were roasting, were preparing the repast for their companions.

At each place of issue two sentinels, motionless, but with eyes and ears on the watch, silently provided for the common safety.

In a compartment separated naturally from the larger one by a block of projecting rock, two women and a man, upon seats rudely cut with the hatchet, were conversing in a low voice—Kate Harwood, the mother of Loyal Heart, and an old Spanish servant, who had charge of the estate now deserted.

At the entrance of this compartment, which formed a kind of separate chamber in the cavern, another man was walking backward and forward, with his hands behind his back, whistling between his teeth an air which he probably composed as his thoughts dictated. This man was Black Elk.

Loyal Heart, Eagle's Head, and Belhumeur, were all absent.

"We are talking idly, and forgetting my poor son," presently said the elder lady, "who has been absent since morning, and who, according to what he told me, ought to have returned by this time."

"Oh! I hope nothing can have happened to him," cried Kate.

"You take great interest in him, then?" asked the old lady, smiling.

"Ah!" replied she, with emotion, while a warm blush rose to her cheeks, "can I do otherwise, after the services he has rendered us, and will continue to render us, I am sure?"

"My son has promised to deliver your uncle; be assured that he will fulfil his promise."

"Oh! I do not at all doubt it, madam. What a noble, grand character!" cried she, with warmth; "how justly is he named Loyal Heart!"

The old lady and Eusebio looked at her and smiled; they were delighted with the enthusiasm of the young girl. Kate perceived the attention with which they were looking at her. She stopped short in confusion, hung down her head and blushed more than ever.

"Oh!" said the old lady, taking her hand, "you may go on, my child; I am pleased to hear you speak thus of my son. Yes," added she, in a melancholy tone, and as if talking to herself, "yes;

his is a grand and noble character; but will it render him less sad?"

"Can he, then, be unhappy?" the young girl ventured to ask, timidly.

"I do not say he is, my child," replied the good mother, with a stifled sigh. "In this world, who can flatter himself with being happy? Every one has his troubles, which he must bear; the All-Powerful measures the burden according to the strength of every man. Supposing that he loved one far above him in rank?"

"Ah!" began Kate, but at that moment a movement was heard in the grotto; several men entered.

"Here is your son, madam," said Black Elk.

"Thank you, my friend," replied she.

"Oh! I am so glad!" said Kate, springing up, joyfully.

But ashamed of this inconsiderate movement, the young girl sank back, confused and blushing, into her seat again.

It was, in fact, Loyal Heart, but he was not alone; Belhumeur and Eagle's Head accompanied him, as did several other trappers.

As soon as he was in the grotto, the young man directed his steps hastily toward his mother's retreat; he kissed her, and then turning toward Kate, he bowed to her with a degree of embarrassment that was not natural to him, and which the old lady could not but remark.

The young girl returned him a salutation not less confused than his own.

"Well," said he, with a cheerful smile, "you must have been very tired of waiting for me, my noble prisoners. Time must travel slowly in this horrible grotto. Pardon me for having confined you to such a hideous dwelling, Miss Harwood—you are made to inhabit splendid palaces. Alas! this is the most magnificent of my habitations."

"With the mother of him who has saved my life, sir," replied the young girl, nobly, "I think myself lodged like a queen, whatever be the place I inhabit."

"You are a thousand times too good," stammered the hunter; "you really make me confused."

"Well, my son," interrupted the old lady, with the evident intention of giving another turn to the conversation, which began to be embarrassing for the two young people, "what have you done to-day? Have you any good news to give us? Miss Harwood is very uneasy about her uncle; she longs to see him again."

"I can quite understand the lady's anxiety," replied the hunter, "which I hope soon to be able to put an end to. We have not done much to-day; we have found it impossible to get upon the track of the bandits. It is enough to crack one's brain with vexation. Fortunately, as we returned, at a few paces from the grotto, we met with the doctor, who, according to his praiseworthy custom, was seeking herbs on the clefts of the rocks, and he told us he had seen a man of suspicious appearance prowling about the neighborhood. We immediately went upon the hunt, and were not long in discovering an individual whom we took prisoner, and have brought hither with us."

"You see, sir," said Kate, with a playful air, "that it is sometimes of use to be seeking simples. Our dear doctor has, according to all appearances, rendered you a great service."

"Without his will being concerned in the matter," said Loyal Heart, laughing.

"But," asked Eusebio, "the man you have taken—what do you mean to do with him?"

"I do not know yet; as soon as our meal is over, I mean to interrogate him; his replies will most likely dictate my conduct with regard to him."

The caldrons were taken off the fire, the quarters of venison were cut into slices, and the trappers and Indians sat down fraternally near each other, and ate their repast with a good appetite.

The man who had been arrested near the grotto had been placed under the guard of two stout trappers, armed to the teeth, who never took their eyes off him; but he seemed to entertain no wish to escape; on the contrary, he did honor vigorously to the food that was placed before him.

As soon as the meal was over, the chiefs drew together apart, and conversed for a few minutes among themselves in a low voice. Then, upon the order of Loyal Heart, the prisoner was brought forward, and they prepared to interrogate him.

This man, at whom they had scarcely looked, was recognized the moment he was face to face with the chiefs, who could not repress an expression of surprise.

"Captain Ouaktehno!" said Loyal Heart, with perfect astonishment.

"Himself, gentlemen!" replied the pirate, with haughty irony; "what have you to ask of him? He is here ready to answer you."

It was an unheard-of piece of audacity in the captain, after what had taken place, to come thus and deliver himself up, without possible resistance, into the hands of men who would not hesitate to inflict upon him a severe vengeance. The hunters were consequently astonished at the proceeding of the pirate, and began to suspect a snare; their surprise increased in proportion as they reflected upon his apparent madness.

They perfectly understood that if they had taken him, it was because he was willing that it should be so; that he had probably some powerful motive for acting thus, particularly after all the pains he had taken to conceal his track from all eyes, and find a retreat so impenetrable that the Indians themselves, those cunning bloodhounds whom nothing generally could throw off the scent, had renounced searching for him.

What did he come to do amidst his most implacable enemies? What reason sufficiently strong had been able to induce him to commit the imprudence of delivering himself up?

This was what the trappers asked each other, while looking at him with that curiosity and that interest which, in spite of ourselves, we are forced to accord to an intrepid man who accomplishes a bold action, whatever otherwise may be his moral character.

"Sir," said Loyal Heart, after the pause of a few minutes, "as you have thought proper to place yourself in our hands, you certainly will not refuse to reply to the questions we may think proper to put to you?"

A smile of an undefinable expression passed over the thin, pale lips of the pirate.

"Not only," replied he, in a calm, clear voice, "will I not refuse to reply to you, gentlemen, but still further, if you will permit, I will forestall your questions by telling you myself spontaneously all that has passed, which will enlighten you, I am sure, with regard to the facts which have appeared obscure, and which you have in vain endeavored to make out."

A murmur of stupefaction pervaded the ranks of the trappers, who had drawn near by degrees, and listened attentively.

The scene assumed strange proportions, and promised to become extremely interesting.

Loyal Heart reflected for a moment; then, addressing the pirate,

"Do so, sir," said he; "we listen to you."

The captain bowed, and, with a jeering tone, commenced his recital; when he arrived at the taking of the camp, he continued thus:

"It was well played, was it not, gentlemen? Certes, I can look for nothing but compliments from you, who are past masters in such matters; but there is one thing of which you are ignorant, and which I will tell you. The capture of the American General's wealth was but of secondary importance to me; I had another aim, and that aim I will make you acquainted with—I wished to obtain possession of his niece. From New Orleans I followed the caravan, step by step; I had corrupted the principal guide, the Babblar, an old friend of mine; abandoning to my companions the gold and the jewels, I desired nothing but the young girl."

"Well, but it seems you missed your aim," interrupted Belhumeur, with a sardonic smile.

"Do you think so?" replied the other, with imperturbable assurance. "Well, you appear to be in the right; I have, for this time, missed my aim, but all is not yet said, and I may not always miss."

"You speak here, amidst a hundred and fifty of the best rifles of the prairies, of this odious project, with as much confidence as if you were in safety, surrounded by your own bandits, concealed in the depths of one of your most secret dens, captain. This is either an act of great imprudence or a still more rare piece of insolence," said Loyal Heart, sternly.

"Bah! the peril is not so great for me as you would make me believe; you know I am not a man easily intimidated, therefore a truce to threats, if you please, and let us reason like serious men."

"We all, hunters, trappers, and Indian warriors, assembled in this grotto—we have the right, acting in the name of our common safety, to apply to you the laws of the frontiers, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, as attainted and convicted, even by your own confession, of robbery and murder. This law we mean to apply to you immediately. What have you to say in your defense?"

"Every thing in its turn, Loyal Heart; we will talk about that presently; but, in the first place, let us terminate, if you please, what I had to say to you. Be satisfied, it is but the delay of a few minutes; I will myself revert to that question you seem to have so much at heart, installing yourself, by your own private authority, judge in the desert."

"That law is as ancient as the world; it emanates from God himself; it is the duty of all honest people to run down a wild beast when they meet with one in their passage."

"The comparison is not so flattering," replied the pirate, perfectly unmoved, "but I am not at all susceptible; I do not easily take offense. Will you, once for all, allow me to speak?"

"Speak, then, and let us have an end of this."

"That is exactly what I ask; listen to me, then. In this world, every one comprehends life after his own fashion, some widely, others in a narrow way; for me, my dream is to retire, a few years hence, to the depths of one of our beautiful provinces with a moderate competency—you see I am not ambitious. A few months back, at the termination of several tolerably lucrative affairs which I had happily effected in the prairies by means of courage and address, I found my-

self master of a pretty round sum, which, according to my custom, I resolved to invest, in order to procure me hereafter the moderate competency of which I was speaking to you. I went to New Orleans to place my money in the hands of an honorable French banker, established in that city, who answered all my expectations, and whom I recommend to you, if you have occasion for such a person."

"What is all this verbiage?" interrupted Loyal Heart, warmly. "You are laughing at us, captain!"

"Not the least in the world; I will go on. At New Orleans, chance afforded me an opportunity of seeing Miss Harwood."

"You!" said Loyal Heart, angrily.

"Why not?" replied the other. "The affair is very simple. I saw her and became madly in love with her."

"Man! man!" said the hunter, coloring with vexation, "this exceeds all bounds. Miss Harwood is a young lady who ought never to be spoken of without the greatest respect; I will not allow her to be insulted in my presence."

"We are exactly of the same opinion," replied the other, jeeringly; "but it is none the less true that I fell in love with her. I skillfully obtained information concerning her; I learnt who she was, the journey she was about to take; I played successfully, as you see; then my plan was laid, which, as you just now said, has completely failed, but which, nevertheless, I do not yet give up."

"We will endeavor to see to that."

"And you will do well if you can."

"Now, I suppose, you have done."

"Not yet, if you please; but at present, for what remains for me to say, the presence of the young lady is indispensable; it is upon her alone depends the success of my mission to you."

"I do not understand you."

"It would be useless for you to understand me at this moment; but, rest satisfied, Loyal Heart, you shall soon have the key to the enigma."

During the whole of this long discussion, the pirate had not, for a moment, lost that self-possession, that sneering smile, that bantering tone, and that freedom of manner that confounded the hunters.

He bore much more resemblance to a gentleman on a visit at the house of a country neighbor, than to a prisoner on the point of being shot. He did not appear to care the least in the world about the danger he was running. As soon as he had finished speaking, whilst the trappers were consulting in a low voice, he employed himself in twisting a maize cigarette, which he lit and smoked quietly.

"Miss Harwood," resumed Loyal Heart, with ill-disguised impatience, "has nothing to do with these debates; her presence is not necessary."

"You are entirely mistaken, my dear sir," replied the pirate coolly, puffing out a volume of smoke; "she is indispensable, and this is why: You understand perfectly, do you not, that I am too cunning a fox to give myself up thus voluntarily into your hands, if I had not behind me some one whose life would answer for mine; that some one is the uncle of the young lady; if I am not at midnight in my den, as you do me the honor to call it, with my brave companions, at precisely ten minutes after midnight, the honorable gentleman will be shot without fail or pity."

A shudder of anger pervaded the ranks of the hunters.

"I know very well," continued the pirate, "that you, personally, care very little for the life of the General, would generously sacrifice it in exchange for mine; but, fortunately for me, his niece, I am convinced, is not of your opinion, and attaches great value to the existence of her uncle; be then good enough to beg her to come here, in order that she may hear the proposal I have to make her. Time presses; the way to my encampment is long; if I arrive too late, you alone will be responsible for the misfortune that may be caused by my involuntary delay."

"I am here, sir," said Kate, coming forward. Concealed amidst the crowd of hunters, she had heard all that had been said.

The pirate threw away his half-consumed cigarette, bowed courteously before the young lady, and saluted her with respect.

"I am proud of the honor, Miss, that you deign to do me."

"A truce to ironical compliments, if you please; I am listening to you; what have you to say to me?"

"You judge me wrongly," replied the pirate; "but I hope to reinstate myself in your good opinion hereafter. Do you not recognize me? I thought I had left a better remembrance in your mind."

"Sir, you insult me," interrupted the young lady, drawing herself up, haughtily; "what can there be in common between me and the leader of bandits?"

At this cutting reproof a flush passed over the face of the pirate; he bit his mustache with anger; but, making a strong effort, he kept down in the depths of his heart the feelings which agitated him, and replied in a calm, respectful tone,

"So be it, lady; crush me; I have deserved it."

"Is it for the purpose of uttering these commonplaces that you have required my presence here, sir? In that case you will

please to allow me to retire; a lady of my rank is not accustomed to such manners, nor to lend an ear to such discourses."

She made a movement to rejoin the mother of Loyal Heart, who on her side advanced toward her.

"One instant, Miss," cried the pirate, haughtily; "since you despise my prayers, listen to my orders!"

"Your orders," shouted the hunter, springing close up to him. "Have you forgotten where you are, miserable scoundrel?"

"Come, come! a truce to threats and abuse, my masters!" replied the pirate, in a commanding voice, crossing his arms upon his breast, throwing up his head, and darting a look of supreme disdain upon all present; "you know very well you dare do nothing against me—that not a single hair of my head will fall."

"This is too much!" cried the hunter.

"Stop, Loyal Heart," said Miss Harwood, placing herself before him; "this man is unworthy of your anger. I prefer seeing him thus; he is best in his part of a bandit—he at least plays that without a mask."

"Yes, I have thrown off the mask," cried the pirate with rage; "and listen to me, silly girl. In three days I will return—you see I keep my word," added he with a sinister smile. "I give you time to reflect; if then you do not consent to follow me, your uncle shall be given up to the most atrocious tortures, and, as a last remembrance of me, I will send you his head."

"Monster!" exclaimed the poor girl in a tone of despair.

"Ah! you see," said he, shrugging his shoulders, and with the grin of a demon, "every one makes love after his own fashion; I have sworn that you shall be my wife."

But Kate could hear no more. Overcome by grief as well as other feelings, she sank senseless into the arms of the mother of the hunter, who with Nô Eusebio, bore her out of the larger apartment.

"Enough!" said Loyal Heart, with a stern accent, laying his hand upon his shoulder; "be thankful to God who allows you to go safe and sound from our hands."

"In three days, at the same hour, you will see me again, my masters," said he, disdainfully.

"Between this and then, chances may change," said Belhumeur.

The pirate made no reply but by a grin and a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders; and left the cavern with a step as firm and free as if nothing extraordinary had happened, without even deigning to turn round, so certain was he of the profound feeling he had caused—of the effect he had produced.

He had scarcely disappeared, when, from the other outlets of the grotto, Belhumeur, Black Elk, and Eagle's Head rushed out upon his track.

Loyal Heart remained thoughtful for an instant, and then went, with a pale face and pensive brow, to inquire after Miss Harwood.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE.

KATE and Loyal Heart were placed, with regard to each other, in a singular position. Both young, both handsome, they loved without daring to confess it to themselves, almost without suspecting it. Both, although their lives had passed in conditions diametrically opposite, possessed equal freshness of sentiments, equal ingenuousness of heart.

The childhood of the young girl had passed away, pale and colorless. She had never felt a beating of the heart. She was as ignorant of love as she was of sorrow; living thus like the birds of heaven, forgetting the days gone by, careless of the morrow.

The appearance of Loyal Heart, under the extraordinary circumstances in which he had presented himself to her, had won upon her mind, then particularly open to all sensations, ready to retain all the strong impressions it might receive.

In presence of the exalted nature of the hunter, of that man in wild costume, but with a manly countenance, of handsome features and noble bearing, she felt agitated without comprehending why.

The fact was, that unknown to herself, by the force of the secret sympathies which exist between all the beings of the great human family, her heart had met the heart she sought for. Delicate and fragile, she stood in need of this energetic man, with the fascinating glance, the lion's courage and an iron will, to support her through life, and defend her with his all-powerful protection.

Thus had she, therefore, from the first moment, yielded with a feeling of undefinable happiness, to the inclination which drew her toward Loyal Heart; and love had installed himself as master in her heart, before she was aware of it, or had even thought of resisting.

The late events had awakened with intense force the passion which

had been sleeping at the bottom of her heart. Now that she was near him, that she heard at every instant his praises from the mouth of his mother, or from those of his companions, she had come to consider his love as forming part of her existence; she could not comprehend how she could have lived so long without loving that man, whom, it appeared, she must have known from her very birth. She no longer lived but for him and by him; happy at a look or a smile, joyful when she saw him, sad when he remained long absent from her.

Loyal Heart had arrived at the same result by a very different route.

Knowing no other woman but his mother, for the Indians by their manners inspired him with nothing but disgust, he had reached the age of six-and-thirty without thinking of love, without knowing what it was, and, what is more, without ever having heard pronounced that word which contains so many things in its four letters, and which, in the world, is the source of so many sublime devotions and so many horrible crimes.

After a long day's hunting through woods and ravines, or after having been engaged fifteen or sixteen hours in trapping beavers, when, in the evening, they met in the prairie at their bivouac fire, the conversations of Loyal Heart and his friend Belhumeur, as ignorant as himself of this matter, could possibly turn upon nothing but the events of the day.

Weeks, months, years passed away without bringing any change in his existence, except a vague uneasiness, the cause unknown, which weighed upon his mind, and for which he could not account. Nature has her imprescriptible rights, and every man must submit to them, in whatever condition he may chance to be placed.

Thus, therefore, when accident brought Miss Harwood before him, by the same sentiment of instinctive and irresistible sympathy which acted upon the young girl, his heart flew towards her.

When, after the fire in the prairie, he quitted the American camp, notwithstanding the precipitation of his departure, he carried away the remembrance of the fair stranger with him. And this remembrance increased with absence. He always fancied he heard the soft and melodious notes of the young girl's voice sounding in his ears, however strong the efforts he made to forget her; in hours of watching or of sleep, she was always there, smiling upon him, and fixing her enchanting looks upon him.

The struggle was severe. Loyal Heart, notwithstanding the passion that devoured him, knew what an insuperable distance separated him from Kate, how senseless and unrealizable this love was. All the objection possibly to be made in such cases, he made, in order to prove he was mad.

He shunned, with an obstinacy that ought to have offended the young girl, all opportunities of meeting her. When by chance they happened to be together, he became taciturn and sullen, never answering without difficulty the questions she put to him, and, with that awkwardness peculiar to unpracticed lovers, seizing the first opportunity for leaving her.

The young girl followed him sadly with her eyes, sighed quietly but deeply, and sometimes a liquid pearl flowed silently down her rosy cheeks at seeing this departure, which she took for indifference, and which was in reality love.

But during the few days that had passed since the taking of the camp the young people had progressed without suspecting it, and this was greatly assisted by the mother of Loyal Heart, who, with that second-sight with which all mothers worthy of the name are endowed, had divined this passion, and the honorable combats of her son, and had constituted herself the secret confidant of their love, assisting it unknown to them, and protecting it with all her power, whilst both lovers were persuaded that their secret was buried in the depths of their own hearts.

Such was the state of things two days after the proposal made by the captain to Miss Harwood.

Loyal Heart appeared more sad and more preoccupied than usual; he walked about the grotto with hasty strides, showing signs of the greatest impatience, and at intervals casting uneasy glances around him.

At length, leaning against one of the projections of the grotto, he let his head sink on his chest, and remained plunged in profound meditation. He had stood thus for some time, when a soft voice murmured in his ear,

"What is the matter, my son? Why are your features clouded with such sadness? Have you any bad news?"

Loyal Heart raised his head, like a man suddenly awakened from sleep. His mother and Kate were standing before him, their arms interlaced, leaning upon each other. He cast upon them a melancholy look, and replied with a stifled sigh,

"Alas! mother, to-morrow is the last day. I have as yet been able to imagine nothing that can save Miss Harwood and restore her uncle to her."

The two women started.

"To-morrow!" murmured Kate; "that is true; it is to-morrow that that man is to come!"

"What will you do, my son?"

"How can I tell, mother?" replied he, impatiently. "Oh! this man is stronger than I am. He has defeated all my plans. Up to the present moment we have not possibly been able to discover his retreat. All our researches have proved useless."

"Loyal Heart," said the young girl softly, "will you then abandon me to the mercy of this bandit? Why, then, did you save me?"

"Oh!" cried the young man, "that reproach kills me!"

"I address no reproach to you, Loyal Heart," said she, warmly; "but I am very unhappy. If I remain, I cause the death of the only relative I have in the world: if I depart, I am dishonored!"

"Oh, to be able to do nothing!" cried he with great excitement. "To see you weep, to know that you are unhappy, and to be able to do nothing! Oh!" added he, "to make you avoid the least anxiety I would sacrifice my life with joy. God knows what I suffer from this want of power."

"Hope, my son, hope!" said the old lady, with an encouraging accent. "God is good. He will not abandon you."

"Hope! how can you tell me to do so, mother? During the last two days my friends and I have attempted things that would appear impossible—and yet without result. Hope! and in a few hours this miserable wretch will come to claim the prey he covets! Better to die than see such a crime committed!"

Kate cast upon him a glance of a peculiar expression, a melancholy smile for a moment passed over her lips, and softly placing her delicate little hand upon his shoulder,

"Loyal Heart," said she, with her melodious, clear voice, "do you love me?"

The young man started; a trembling pervaded every limb.

"Why that question?" said he, in a deeply agitated tone.

"Answer me," replied she, "without hesitation, as I put the question to you; the hour is a solemn one; I have a favor to ask of you."

"Oh! name it, lady; you know I can refuse you nothing!"

"Answer me, then," said she, trembling with emotion; "do you love me?"

"If it be to love you to desire to sacrifice my life for you—if it be to love you to suffer martyrdom at witnessing the flowing of a tear which I would purchase with my whole blood—if it be to love you to have the courage to see you accomplish the sacrifice that will be required from you to-morrow to save your uncle—oh, yes! lady, I love you with all my soul! Therefore, speak without fear; whatever you ask of me I will perform it with joy."

"That is well, my dear friend," said she; "I depend upon your word; to-morrow I will remind you of it when that man presents himself; but, in the first place, my uncle must be saved, if it were to cost me my life. Alas! he has been a father to me: he loves me as his daughter. It was on my account that he fell into the hands of the bandits. Oh! swear to me, Loyal Heart, that you will deliver him," added she, with an expression of anguish, impossible to be described.

Loyal Heart was about to reply, when Belhumeur and Black Elk entered the grotto.

"At last!" cried he, springing towards them.

The three men talked for a few minutes together in a low voice; then the hunter returned hastily towards the two women.

His face was glowing with animation.

"You were right, my dear mother," cried he, in a cheerful tone. "God is good; He will not abandon those who place their confidence in Him. Now it is I who say, Hope! I will soon restore your uncle to you."

"Oh!" cried she, joyfully, "can it be possible?"

"Hope, I repeat! Adieu, mother! Implore God to second me; I am about, more than ever, to stand in need of His help!"

Without saying more, the young man rushed out of the grotto, followed by the greater part of his companions.

There only remained about half a score men charged with the defense of the two women.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRISONERS.

WHEN the red-skins and the hunters had recovered the camp of the General, the pirates, according to the orders of their leader, had spread themselves about in all directions, in order the more easily to escape the researches of their enemies.

The captain and the four men who took off the General and his negro, both bound and gagged, had descended the declivity of the

rocks, at the risk of being dashed to pieces a thousand times by falling down the precipice which gaped at their feet.

When arrived at a certain distance, reassured by the silence which reigned around them, and still more by the extraordinary difficulties they had surmounted in reaching the place where they found themselves, they stopped to take breath.

A profound darkness enveloped them; over their heads, at an immense height, they perceived, twinkling like little stars, the torches borne by the hunters who pursued them, but who took care not to venture in the dangerous path they had followed.

"This is lucky," said the captain; "now, my boys, let us rest for a few minutes; we have nothing at the present time to fear: place your prisoners here, and go, two of you, and reconnoiter."

His orders were executed; a few minutes later the two bandits returned, announcing that they had discovered an excavation, which, provisionally, might offer them shelter and safety.

"Let us go to it," cried the captain. And setting the example, he started off in the direction pointed out by the scouts.

They soon arrived at a hollow nook, which appeared tolerably spacious, and which was situated a few fathoms lower down than the place they had stopped at.

When they were concealed in this hiding-place, the captain's first care was to close the entrance hermetically, which was not difficult, for that entrance was very narrow, the bandits having been obliged to stoop to penetrate into it.

"There," said the captain, "now we are snug; in this fashion we need not be afraid of impertinent visitors."

Drawing a steel from his pocket, he lit a torch of candle-wood, with which, with that foresight that never abandons persons of his stamp, even in the most critical circumstances, he had taken care to provide himself.

As soon as they could distinguish objects, the bandits uttered a cry of joy. What in the darkness they had taken for a simple excavation, proved to be one of those natural grottos of which so many are found in these countries.

"Eh! eh!" said the captain, laughing, "let us see what sort of quarters we have got into; remain here, you fellows, and keep strict watch over your prisoners; I will go and reconnoiter our new domain."

After having lit a second torch, he explored the grotto.

It dipped deep under the mountain by a gentle descent; the walls of it were every where lofty, and sometimes they were widened into large compartments.

They must have received external air by imperceptible fissures, for the light burned freely, and the captain breathed without difficulty.

The further the pirate advanced, the more perceptible the air became, which led him to conclude he was approaching an entrance of some kind.

He had been walking nearly twenty minutes, when a puff of wind came sharply in his face, and made the flames of his torch flicker.

"Hum!" muttered he, "here is a place of exit—let us be prudent and put out our lights, we know not whom we may meet with outside."

He crushed the light of his torch beneath his feet, and remained a few instants motionless, to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness.

He was a prudent man, and thoroughly acquainted with his trade of a bandit, was this captain. If the plan he had formed for the attack of the camp had failed, it had required for that a concurrence of fortuitous circumstances impossible to have been foreseen by any body. Therefore, after the first moment of ill humor caused by the check he had received, he had bravely taken his part; reserving for himself, to take his revenge as soon as an opportunity should present itself.

Besides, it seemed as if Fortune was willing to smile on him afresh, by offering him, just at the moment when he had the greatest want of it, a refuge not likely to be discovered.

It was, therefore, with an almost unspeakable joy and hope that he waited till his eyes should be accustomed to the darkness, to permit him to distinguish objects, and know if he were really going to find a place of exit, which would render him master of an almost impregnable position.

His expectations were not disappointed.

As soon as the dazzling effect of the blaze of the torch was got rid of, he perceived at a considerable distance before him, a feeble light.

He walked resolutely forward, and at the end of a few minutes, came to the so much desired outlet.

Decidedly, fortune was once more propitious to him.

The outlet of the grotto opened upon the banks of a little river, the water of which came murmuring close to the mouth of the cavern, so that the bandits might, by swimming or constructing a raft, go in and out without leaving any traces, and thus defeat all researches.

The captain was too well acquainted with the pirates of the West, in which he had for nearly ten years exercised his honorable and lu-

crative profession, not to be able to know at once where he was, on looking around him.

He perceived that this river flowed at some distance from the camp of the Americans, from which its numberless meanderings tended still more to remove it. He breathed a sigh of satisfaction when he had well examined the environs, no longer fearing discovery, and thenceforward at ease regarding his position. He lit his torch again, and retraced his steps.

His companions, with the exception of one who watched the prisoners, were fast asleep.

The captain aroused them.

"Come, be alive! be alive!" said he; "this is not the time for sleeping; we have something else to do."

The bandits arose with a very ill grace, rubbing their eyes, and gaping enough to put their jaws out.

The captain made them, in the first place, solidly close up the hole by which they had entered; then he ordered them to follow him with the prisoners, whose legs they unbound, in order that they might walk.

They stopped in one of the numerous halls, if we may so term them, which the captain had discovered on his route; one man was appointed to guard the prisoners, who were left in this place, and the captain, with the three other bandits, continued their way to the outlet.

"You see," said he to them, pointing to the outlet, "that misfortune has its good, since chance has allowed us to discover a place of refuge where no one will come to seek us. You, Frank, set off directly for the rendezvous I have appointed with your comrades, and bring them hither, as well as all the rest of our men who did not form part of the expedition. As for you, Antonio, you must procure us some provisions. Go, both of you. It is useless to tell you I shall await your return with impatience."

The two bandits plunged into the river without reply, and disappeared.

"As for you, Gonzales," said he, "employ yourself in gathering wood together for firing, and dry leaves for bedding; come, to work! to work!"

An hour later, a clear fire sparkled in the grotto, and upon soft beds of dry leaves the bandits slept soundly.

At sunrise, the rest of the troop arrived.

There were still thirty of them!

The worthy leader felt his heart dilate with joy at the sight of the rich collection of scoundrels he had still at his disposal. With them he did not despair of re-establishing his affairs, and of soon taking a signal revenge.

After an abundant breakfast, composed of venison, copiously washed down with mezcal, the captain at length turned his attention to his prisoners.

He repaired to the hall that served as a dungeon. Since he had fallen into the hands of the bandits, the General had remained silent, apparently insensible to the ill treatment to which he had been exposed. The wounds he had received, being neglected, had festered, and gave him terrible pain; but he did not utter a complaint. A deep grief took possession of his mind from the moment of his capture; he saw all his hopes overthrown of being able to resume the execution of the project that had brought him into the prairies. All his companions were dead, and he knew not what fate awaited himself. The only thing that brought a slight consolation to his pains, was the certainty that his niece had succeeded in escaping.

But what was to become of her in this desert, where nothing was to be met with but wild beasts, and still more ferocious Indians? How could a young girl, accustomed to all the comforts of life, support the hazards of that existence of privations?

This idea redoubled his sufferings.

The captain was terrified at the state in which he found him.

"Come, General," said he, "courage! Chance often changes; I know something of that! never despair; nobody can tell what tomorrow will bring about. Give me your parole not to endeavor to escape, and I will immediately restore you to the freedom of your limbs."

"I can not give you that parole," said the General, with firmness; "I should take a false oath, if I did. On the contrary, I swear to endeavor to fly by all possible means."

"Bravo! well answered!" said the pirate, laughing; "in your place, I should have replied just the same; only at the present moment, I believe, with the best will in the world, it would be impossible for you to go a step. In spite, therefore, of all you have said to me, I will restore both you and your servant to liberty, and you may make what use you like of it; but it is freedom of your limbs, please to recollect, that is all."

With a stroke of his knife he cut the cords which bound the arms of the General, and then performed the same service for the negro, Jupiter.

The latter, as soon as he was free in his movements, began jumping and laughing, exhibiting two rows of formidable teeth of dazzling whiteness.

"Come, be prudent, blacky," said the pirate; "be quiet here, if you do not want to have a bullet through your head."

"I will not go without my master," replied Jupiter, rolling his great wild-looking eyes.

"That is right!" replied the pirate, sneering; "that is agreed upon; that devotedness does you honor, blacky."

Turning next to the General, the captain bathed his wounds with cold water, and dressed them carefully; then, after placing provisions before the prisoners, to which the negro alone did honor, the pirate retired.

Toward the middle of the day, the captain called together the principal men of his band.

"Fellows," said he, "we can not deny that we have lost the first game; the prisoners we have made are far from reimbursing our expenses; we cannot remain quiet under the effects of a check, which dishonors us, and renders us ridiculous. I am going to make up a second game; this time if I do not win, I shall be unlucky indeed. During my absence, watch well over the prisoners. Pay attention to the last orders I give you: If to-morrow, at midnight, I have not returned, safe and sound among you, at a quarter past midnight, I say you will shoot the two prisoners, without remission; you perfectly understand what I say, do you not?—without remission."

"Be at ease, captain," replied Frank, in the names of his companions; "you may go as soon as you please; your orders shall be executed."

"I know they will; but be sure not to shoot them a minute too soon, or a minute too late."

"Exactly at the time named"

"That is understood. Adieu, then; do not be too impatient for my return."

Upon this the captain left the grotto, to throw himself in the way of Loyal Heart.

We have seen what the bandit wanted to do with the trapper.

After his strange proposal to the hunters, the leader of the pirates retook, at his best speed, the road to his den.

But he was too much accustomed to the life of the prairies not to suspect that several of his enemies would follow his track at a distance. Therefore had he put in practice, to mislead them, all the tricks his inventive mind could furnish him with, making détours without number, retracing incessantly his steps, or, as it is vulgarly said, going back ten yards to advance one.

These numerous precautions had excessively retarded his journey.

When arrived on the banks of the river whose waters bathed the entrance to the cavern, he cast a last look around him, to ascertain that no busy eye was watching his movements.

Every thing was calm, nothing suspicious appeared, and he was about to launch into the stream the raft concealed beneath the leaves, when a slight noise in the bushes attracted his attention.

The pirate started; promptly drawing a pistol from his belt, he cocked it, and advanced boldly toward the spot whence this alarming noise proceeded.

A man, bent toward the ground, was busy digging up herbs and plants with a small spade.

The pirate smiled, and replaced his pistol in his belt.

He had recognized the doctor, who was as much absorbed in his favorite passion as usual; so much so, indeed, that he had not perceived him.

After having surveyed him for an instant with disdain, the pirate was turning his back upon him, when an idea occurred to him which made him, on the contrary, advance.

"Hallo! my brave fellow," said he, in a jeering tone, "what madness possesses you to be herbalizing thus at all hours of the day and night?"

"How?" replied the doctor, "what do you mean by that?"

"Zounds! it's plain enough! Don't you know it is not far from midnight?"

"That is true; but there is such a fine moon!"

"Which you, I suppose, have taken for the sun," said the pirate, with a loud laugh; "but," added he, becoming all at once serious, "that is of no consequence now; although half a madman, I have been told you are a pretty good doctor."

"I have passed my examination," replied the doctor, offended by the terms he was named in.

"Very well! you are just the man I want, then."

The other bowed with a very ill grace; it was evident he was not flattered by the attention.

"What do you require of me?" asked he; "are you ill?"

"Not I, thank God! but one of your friends, who is at this moment my prisoner, is; so please to follow me."

"But—," the doctor would fain have objected.

"I admit of no excuses; follow me, or I will blow your brains out. Besides, don't be afraid, you run no risk; my men will pay you all the respect science is entitled to."

As resistance was impossible, the worthy man did as he was bid.

den with a good grace—with so good a grace even, that for a second he allowed a smile to stray across his lips, which would have aroused the suspicions of the pirate if he had perceived it.

The captain commanded the doctor to walk on before him, and both thus reached the river.

At the instant they quitted the spot where this conversation had taken place, the branches of a bush parted slowly, and a head, shaved with the exception of a long tuft of hair at the top, on which was stuck an eagle's feather, appeared, then a body, and then an entire man, who bounded like a jaguar in pursuit of them.

This man was Eagle's Head.

He was a silent spectator of the embarkation of the two whites, saw them enter the grotto, and then, in his turn, disappeared in the shade of the woods, after having murmured to himself in a low voice the word "*Och!*" (good) the highest expression of joy in the language of the Comanches.

The doctor had plainly only served as a bait to attract the pirate, and cause him to fall into the snare laid by the Indian chief.

Now, had the worthy doctor any secret intelligence with Eagle's Head? That is what we shall soon know.

On the morrow at daybreak the pirate ordered a close battue to be made in the environs of the grotto; but no track existed.

The captain rubbed his hands with joy; his expedition had doubly succeeded, since he had managed to return to his cavern without being followed.

Certain of having nothing to dread, he was unwilling to keep about him so many men in a state of inactivity; placing, therefore, his troop provisionally under the command of Frank, a veteran bandit, in whom he had perfect confidence, he only retained ten chosen men with him, and sent away the rest.

Although the affair he was now engaged in was interesting, and his success appeared certain, he was not, on that account, willing to neglect his other occupations, and maintain a score of bandits in idleness, who might, at any moment, from merely having nothing else to do, play him an ugly turn.

It was evident that the captain was not only a prudent man, but was thoroughly acquainted with his honorable associates.

When the pirates had left the grotto, the captain made a sign to the doctor to follow him, and conducted him to the General.

After having introduced them to each other with that ironical politeness in which he was such a master, the bandit retired, leaving them together.

Only before he departed, the captain drew a pistol from his belt, and clapping it to the breast of the doctor,

"Although you may be half a madman," said he, "as you may, nevertheless, have some desire to betray me, observe this well, my dear sir: at the least equivocal proceeding that I shall see you attempt, I will blow your brains out; you are warned, now act as you think proper."

And replacing his pistol in his belt, he retired with one of his eloquent sneers on his lips.

The doctor listened to this admonition with a very demure countenance, but with a sly smile, which, in spite of himself, glided over his lips, but which, fortunately, was not perceived by the captain.

The General and his negro, Jupiter, were confined in a compartment of the grotto at the same distance from the outlet.

They were alone, for the captain had deemed it useless to keep guards constantly with them.

Both seated upon a heap of leaves, with heads cast down and crossed arms, they were reflecting seriously, if not profoundly.

At the sight of the *savant*, the dismal countenance of the General was lighted up with a fugitive smile of hope.

"Ah, doctor, are you there?" said he, holding out to him a hand which the other pressed warmly, but silently; "have I reason to rejoice or to be still sad at your presence?"

"Are we alone?" demanded the doctor, without answering the General's question.

"I believe so," said he, in a tone of surprise; "at all events it is easy to satisfy yourself."

The doctor groped all round the place, carefully examining every corner; he then went back to the prisoners.

"We can talk," said he.

He was habitually so absorbed by his scientific calculations, and was naturally so absent, that the prisoners had but little confidence in him.

"And my niece?" asked the General, anxiously.

"Be at ease on her account; she is in safety with a hunter named Loyal Heart, who has a great respect for her."

The General breathed a sigh of relief; this good news had restored him all his courage.

"Oh!" said he, "of what consequence is my being a prisoner? Now I know my niece is safe, I can suffer any thing."

"No, no," said the doctor, warmly; "on the contrary, you must escape from this place to-morrow, by some means."

"Why?"

"Answer me in the first place."

"I ask no better than to do so."

"Your wounds appear slight; are they progressing toward cure? Are you able to walk a distance?"

"I believe so, if it be absolutely necessary."

"Eh! eh!" said the negro, who, to that moment, had remained silent, "am I not able to carry my master, when he can walk no longer?"

The General pressed his hand.

"That's true; so far," said the doctor, "all is well, only you must escape!"

"I should be most glad to do so, but how?"

"Ah! that," said the doctor, scratching his head, "is what I do not know for my part! But be at ease, I will find some means; at present, I don't know what."

Steps were heard approaching, and the captain appeared.

"Well!" asked he, "how are your patients going on?"

"Not too well!" replied the doctor.

"Bah! bah!" resumed the pirate; "all that will come round; besides, the General will soon be free, then he can get well at his ease. Now, doctor, come along with me; I hope I have left you and your friend long enough together to have said all you wish."

The doctor followed him without a reply, after having made the General a parting sign to recommend prudence.

The day passed away without further incident.

The prisoners looked for the night with impatience; in spite of themselves, a confidence in the doctor had gained upon them—they hoped.

Toward evening that worthy person reappeared. He walked with a deliberate step, his countenance was cheerful, he held a torch in his hand.

"What is there fresh, doctor?" asked the General; "you appear to be quite gay."

"In fact, General, I am so," replied he, smiling, "because I have found the means of securing your escape—not forgetting my own."

"And those means?"

"Are half executed," said he, with a little dry smile, which was peculiar to him when he was satisfied.

"What do you mean by that?"

"By Galen! something very simple, but which you never would guess: all our bandits are asleep, we are masters of the grotto."

"That may be possible; but if they should wake?"

"Don't trouble yourself about that; they will wake, of that there is no doubt, but not within six hours at least."

"How the devil can you tell that?"

"Because I took upon myself to send them to sleep; that is to say, at their supper I served them with a decoction of opium, which brought them down like lumps of lead, and they have all been snoring ever since like so many forge-bellows."

"Oh! that is capital!" said the General.

"Is it not?" said the doctor, modestly. "By Galen, I was determined to repair the mischief I had done you by my negligence! I am not a soldier, I am but a poor physician; I have made use of my proper arms; you see that in certain cases they are as good as others."

"They are a hundred times better! Doctor, you are a noble fellow!"

"Well, come, let us lose no time."

"That is true, let us be gone; but the captain, what have you done with him?"

"Oh, as to him, the devil only knows where he is. He left us after dinner without saying any thing to any body; but I have a shrewd suspicion I know where he is gone, and am much mistaken if we do not see him presently."

"All, then, is for the best; lead on."

The three men set off at once. In spite of the means employed by the doctor, the General and the negro were not quite at ease.

They arrived at the compartment which now served as a dormitory for the bandits; they were lying about asleep in all directions.

The fugitives passed safely through them.

When arrived at the entrance of the grotto, at the moment they were about to unfasten the raft to cross the river, they saw, by the pale rays of the moon, another raft, mounted by fifteen men, who steadily directed their course toward them.

Their retreat was cut off.

How could they possibly resist such a number of adversaries?

"What a fatality!" murmured the General, despondingly.

"Oh!" said the doctor, piteously, "a plan of escape that cost me so much trouble to elaborate!"

The fugitives threw themselves into a cavity of the rocks, to avoid being seen, and there waited the landing of the new-comers, whose maneuvers appeared more and more suspicious.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAW OF THE PRAIRIES.

A CONSIDERABLE space of ground, situated in front of the grotto inhabited by Loyal Heart, had been cleared, the trees cut down, and from a hundred and fifty to two hundred huts erected.

The whole tribe of the Comanches was encamped on this spot.

Among trappers, hunters and red-skin warriors, there existed the best possible understanding.

In the center of this temporary village, where the huts of buffalo-skins, painted of different colors, were arranged with a degree of symmetry, one much larger than the others, surmounted by scalps fixed to long poles, and in which a large fire was continually kept up, served as a hut of council.

The greatest bustle prevailed in the village.

The Indian warriors were armed and in their war-paint, as if preparing to march to battle.

The hunters had dressed themselves in their best costumes, and cleaned their arms with the greatest care, as if expecting soon to make use of them.

The horses, completely caparisoned, stood shackled and held by half a score of warriors, ready to be mounted.

Hunters and red-skins were coming and going.

A rare, and almost unknown thing among Indians, sentinels were placed at regular distances to signalize the approach of a stranger.

In short, everything denoted that one of the ceremonies peculiar to the prairies was about to take place.

All at once the Indian sentinels uttered a cry, which was immediately repeated by a man placed before the hut of council.

At this signal the Comanche chiefs arose and left the hut.

The hunters and Indian warriors seized their arms, ranged themselves on each side of the grotto and waited.

A cloud of dust rolled toward the camp with great rapidity, but was soon dispersed, and revealed a troop of horsemen riding at full speed. These horsemen, for the most part, wore the costume of Mexican bandits.

At their head, upon a magnificent horse, black as night, came a man whom all immediately recognized.

This was Captain Ouaktehno, who came audaciously at the head of his troop to claim the fulfillment of the odious bargain he had imposed three days before.

When arrived in front of the chiefs drawn up before the hut of council, the twenty horsemen stopped suddenly.

The bold maneuver was executed with such dexterity, that the hunters with difficulty repressed a cry of admiration.

Scarcely had the pirates halted, than the ranks of the warriors, placed on the left and right of the hut, deployed like a fan, and closed behind them.

The twenty pirates found themselves by this movement, executed with incredible quickness, inclosed within a circle, formed by more than five hundred men, well armed and equally well mounted.

The captain felt a slight tremor of uneasiness at the sight of this maneuver, and he almost repented of having come. But surmounting this involuntary emotion, he smiled disdainfully.

He bowed slightly to the chiefs ranged before him, and addressing Belhumeur, in a firm voice:

"Where is the young lady?" demanded he.

"I do not know what you mean," replied the hunter, in a bantering tone. "I do not believe that there is any young lady here upon whom you have any rights whatever."

"What does that mean? and what is going on here?" muttered the captain, casting around a look of defiance. "Has Loyal Heart forgotten the visit I paid him three days ago?"

"Loyal Heart never forgets anything," answered Belhumeur, in a firm tone; "but the question is not of him now. How can you have the audacity to present yourself among us at the head of a set of brigands?"

"Oh, oh!" said the pirate; "what game are we playing now?"

"You will soon learn."

"I can wait," replied the pirate, casting around a provoking glance.

"In these deserts, where all human laws are silent," replied the hunter, "the law of God ought to reign in full vigor. This law says, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

"What follows?" asked the pirate, in a dry tone.

"During ten years," continued Belhumeur, impassively, "at the head of a troop of bandits, without faith and without law, you have been the terror of the prairies, pillaging and assassinating white men and red-men; for you are of no country, plunder and rapine being your only rule; trappers, hunters, or Indians, you have respected no one, if murder could procure you a piece of gold. Not many days ago, you took by assault the camp of peaceful American travelers, and massacred them without pity. This career of crime must have an end, and that end is now come. We all, Indians and hunters, are assembled here to try you, and apply to you the implacable law of the prairies."

The pirate cast a look behind him, and saw five hundred guns leveled toward his troop.

A shudder passed through his members, a mortal pallor covered his face; the pirate understood that he was confronted by a terrible danger; but, after a second of reflection, he recovered all his coolness, and addressing the hunter, he replied, in a jeering voice:

"What is the use of all these menaces, which don't frighten me? Dare but to touch a single hair of my head, and the General, the uncle of the young girl you would in vain ravish from my power, will immediately pay with his life, for the insult you will offer me. Believe me then, my masters, cease to endeavor to frighten me; give up to me with a good grace her whom I come to demand, or I swear to you, that within an hour the General will have died."

"Not so fast!" said Belhumeur, and with a motion of his hand he drew the attention of the captain to a group, which had been formed with silent swiftness, near at hand. It consisted of Loyal Heart, Eagle's Head, the doctor, the General, and the men who had been imprisoned in the cave with him. The apparent stupidity of the worthy doctor had worked

out its legitimate results. The pirate saw, at a glance, that he had been checkmated in his game, that the end had come, and he was lost.

The fifteen men whom the General and doctor had encountered at the moment of their departure from the cave were a party brought by Eagle's Head to assist in their rescue.

The captain comprehended all.

"Die, then!" he cried, aiming one of his pistols at Loyal Heart.

But, quick as thought, Belhumeur, who had watched his movements, threw himself before his friend.

The shot resounded. The ball struck the Canadian, who fell.

"One!" cried the pirate, with a ferocious laugh.

"Two!" screamed Eagle's Head, and with the bound of a panther he leaped upon the pirate's horse behind him.

Before the captain could make a movement to defend himself, the Indian seized him with his left hand, by the long hair, of which he formed a tuft, and pulled him backwards violently, head downwards.

The horse stumbled over a root; the two enemies rolled upon the ground. Only one rose up. That was the Comanche chief, brandishing the scalp of the pirate.

When he saw his captain fallen, Frank, in the name of his companions, proclaimed that they surrendered. At a signal from Loyal Heart they laid down their arms and were bound.

Belhumeur, the brave Canadian, whose devotedness had saved the life of his friend, had received a serious wound, but which, happily, was not mortal. He had been instantly lifted up and carried into the grotto, where the mother of the hunter paid him every attention.

Eagle's Head approached Loyal Heart, who stood, pensive and silent, leaning against a tree.

"The chiefs are assembled round the fire of council," said he, "and await my brother."

"I follow my brother," replied the hunter, laconically.

When the two men entered the hut, all the chiefs were assembled; among them were the General, Black Elk, and some other trappers.

The calumet was brought into the middle of the circle, by the pipe-bearer; he bowed with respect toward the four cardinal points, and then presented the long tube to every chief in his turn.

The prisoners, collected in a group, were strictly guarded by a detachment of warriors.

When all were assembled, Eagle's Head arose to speak, and, addressing the pirates, said:

"Dogs of pale-faces, the council of the great chiefs of the powerful nation of the Comanches, whose vast hunting-grounds cover a great part of the earth, has pronounced your fate. Try, after having lived like wild beasts, not to die like timid old women."

"Our brother, Loyal Heart," continued the chief, "has interceded for you. You will not be fastened to the stakes; the chiefs leave to yourselves the choice of your death."

"By what right," cried Frank, "does Loyal Heart intercede for us? Does he fancy we are not men? that tortures will be able to draw from us cries and complaints unworthy of us? No! no! lead us to punishment; that which you can inflict upon us will not be so cruel as those which we make the warriors of your nation undergo when they fall into our hands."

At these insulting words a sensation of anger pervaded the ranks of the Indians, whilst the pirates, on the contrary, uttered cries of joy and triumph.

"Dogs! rabbits!" shouted they; "Comanche warriors are old women who ought to wear petticoats."

Loyal Heart advanced, and silence was re-established.

"You have wrongly understood the words of the chief," said he; "when leaving you the choice of your death, it was not an insult, but a mark of respect he paid you. Here is my poniard; you shall be unbound, let it pass from hand to hand, and be buried in all your hearts in turns! The man who is free, and without hesitation kills himself at a single blow, is more brave than he who, fastened to the stake of torture, unable to endure the pain, insults his executioner in order to receive a prompt death."

The formidable troop of Captain Ouaktehno was thus annihilated. Unfortunately, there were other pirates in the prairies.

The ladies, shut up in the interior of the cavern, were ignorant of the terrible drama that had been played, and of the sanguinary expiation which had terminated it.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE interview of the General and his niece was most touching.

The old soldier, so roughly treated for some time past, was delighted to press to his bosom the innocent child who now constituted his whole family, and who, by a miracle, had escaped the misfortunes that had assailed her.

"Now, uncle," said she at length, "what is your intention?"

"Alas, my child!" replied he, "we must without delay leave these terrible countries, and return to New Orleans."

"Then shall we depart soon?" said she, sadly.

"To-morrow, if possible. What should I do here now? Heaven itself declares against me, since it obliges me to renounce this expedition, the success of which would have made the happiness of my old age; but God is not willing that I should be consoled. His will be done!" added he, in a tone of resignation.

"My poor uncle!"

"Thank you for the kindness you evince, my child; but let us quit this subject that saddens you; let us speak a little, if you please, of the brave people to whom we owe so many obligations."

"Of Loyal Heart?" murmured she, blushing.

"Yes," replied the General, "Loyal Heart and his mother, the worthy woman whom I have not yet been able to thank, on account of the wound of poor Belhumeur, and to whom it is due, you say, that you have not suffered any privations."

"She has had all the cares of a tender mother for me."

"How can I ever acquit myself toward her and her noble son? She is blest in having such a child! Alas! that comfort is not given to me; I am alone!"

"And I?" said the young girl, in a faint voice. "Oh! you!" replied he, embracing her tenderly; you are my beloved daughter, but I have no son!"

"That is true," murmured she, thoughtfully.

"Loyal Heart," said the General, "is of too proud a nature to accept any thing of me. What am I to do? how acquit myself toward him? how acknowledge, as I ought, the immense service he has rendered me?"

There was a moment of silence.

Kate inclined toward the General, and, kissing his brow, she said to him, in a low tremulous voice, hiding her face upon his shoulder:

"Uncle, I have an idea."

"Speak, my darling!" replied he, "speak without fear; it is, perhaps, God who inspires you."

"You have no son to whom you can bequeath your name and your immense fortune, have you, uncle?"

"Alas! I thought, for a time, I might recover one, but that hope has vanished forever. You know, child, I am alone."

"Dear uncle, since you regret so much not having a son to whom you could, after you, leave your name, why not adopt Loyal Heart?"

The General looked at her; she was covered with blushes, and trembling like a leaf.

"Oh, darling!" said he, embracing her, "your idea is a charming one, but it is impracticable. I should be happy and proud to have a son like Loyal Heart. You yourself have told me how his mother adores him; she must be jealous of his love; she will never consent to share it with a stranger."

"Perhaps she might!" murmured the young girl.

"And then," added the General, "if even his mother, for love of him, in order to give him a rank in society, should accept my offer, he himself would refuse."

"Well, but try, uncle," said she, coaxingly; "if your proposal be repulsed, you will at least have proved to Loyal Heart that you are not ungrateful, and that you have known how to appreciate him at his just value."

"Do you wish it?" said the General, who asked no better than to be convinced.

"I do wish it, uncle," said she, embracing him to conceal her joy and her blushes. "I do not know why, but it appears to me you will succeed."

"Well, so be it, then," murmured the General, with a melancholy smile. "Request Loyal Heart and his mother to come to me."

"In five minutes they shall be here," cried she, radiant with joy.

A few minutes later, Loyal Heart and his mother, brought by Kate, were before him.

The General bowed with courtesy as they entered, and with a sigh desired his niece to retire.

The young girl complied with great agitation.

"You have sent for us, General," said Loyal Heart, cheerfully, "and you see we have hastened to comply with your desire."

"Thank you for your prompt attention, my friend," replied the General. "In the first place, receive the expression of my gratitude for the important services you have rendered me. What I say to you, my friend—I entreat you to permit me to give you that title—is addressed likewise to your good and excellent mother, for the tender cares she has lavished on my niece."

"General," replied the hunter, with emotion, "I thank you for these kind words, which amply repay me for what you think you owe me. In coming to your aid, I only accomplished a vow I have made never to leave my neighbor without help. Believe me, I desire no other recompense but your esteem, and I am overpaid for the little I have done by the satisfaction I at this moment experience."

"I should wish, notwithstanding, to reward you in another fashion."

"Reward me?" cried the young man, coloring and drawing back.

"Allow me to finish," resumed the General, warmly; "if the proposition I wish to submit to you displeases you, well then you can answer me, and answer me as frankly as I am about to explain myself."

"Speak, General; I will listen to you attentively."

"My friend, my journey into the prairies had a sacred object, which I have not been able to attain; you know the reason why—the men who followed me have died at my side. Left almost alone, I find myself forced to renounce a search which, if it had been crowned with success, would have constituted the happiness of the few years I have yet to live. Now, in the decline of life, my house is empty, my heart is solitary. I am alone, alas! without relations, without friends, without an heir to whom I could bequeath not my fortune, but my name, which a long line of ancestors have transmitted to me without stain. Will you replace for me the family I have lost; answer, Loyal Heart, will you be to me a son?"

At this unexpected offer the hunter stood astonished, breathless, and not knowing what to reply. Finally he stammered:

"I will be your son, General, if you will give me also Miss Harwood, who shall be your daughter."

"Nothing could be better," cried the General, heartily. "It is like a romance, is it not, madame? And you, too, must make your home with us. God is good," he added, after a moment, with a sigh, "though He has ways of His own. I had a son, but he was a wild youth. Several years ago he fled from home, to join the pirates in their desperate career. I heard that he was dead. Again, I heard that his death was doubtful, and it was in the vain hope of finding and reclaiming him that I undertook this journey. Dead or alive, let him go. You shall be the son of my old age."

At this moment Kate entered, blushing and beautiful. Loyal Heart took her hand, pressing it to his lips, while his mother looked on, radiant with joy.

"Ho! ho!" cried the General, gayly, "the first priest we meet shall make an end of this."

And he kept his promise, within a week.

As neither Loyal Heart nor his mother could be quite happy to give up all of the freedom to which they had been accustomed, the General purchased immense estates in Texas, where he erected a fine summer residence, and where the whole family resided the most of the year. As to the mother of Loyal Heart, she found occupation thereafter, in listening to the prattle of her son's two boys, and in relating to them the many adventures of their father.

THE END.